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ABSTRACT

Educators and service providers often have little opportunity to work cooperatively with families to enhance outcomes for children. This document is the third in a four-part training module that was developed by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Child, Family, and Community Program. The module is based on an ecological, family-centered approach to education and service delivery and is used to train state cadres in Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Alaska, and Washington. The project's goal is to help educators and human-service workers form effective and supportive partnerships with each other and with the families they serve. The module contains a training outline with procedures, activities, overhead transparencies, handouts, key articles, and a paper entitled, "The Ecology of the Family: A Background Paper for a Family-Centered Approach to Education and Social Services Delivery." This particular workshop focuses on the importance of family involvement in their children's education, with an emphasis on reaching out to hard-to-reach families. (LMI)

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ED 404 741

Working Respectfully with Families

A Practical Guide for Educators and Human Service Workers

Module III: Creating Family-Friendly Schools

Christie Connard, Rebecca Novick, and Helen Nissani

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Working Respectfully with Families: A Practical Guide for Educators and Human Service Professionals

Training Module III

Creating Family-Friendly Schools

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Child, Family, and Community Program
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March 1996

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Welcome

Thank you for being a part of NWREL's *Working Respectfully with Families* training cadre. Your experience and expertise will assure the success of the workshops. As a result of your effective presentation, personnel from schools and social service agencies will be in better positions to work toward changing the way they work with and view families.

For the past five years, the Child, Family, and Community Program (CFC) of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) has studied the development of school-linked comprehensive services in the Pacific Northwest. CFC has consistently found that educators and social service providers find it highly challenging to form partnerships with families that are based on mutual respect and reciprocity. Professionals often found it difficult to recognize strengths in the families they served. Frequently, they viewed project activities as required, remedial interventions.

There is a tendency in our educational and social service delivery systems to view children in isolation from their families, and families in isolation from their community and larger society.

The primary goal of these workshops is to facilitate a change in attitude on the part of those who work with children and families. There is a tendency in our educational and social service delivery systems to view children in isolation from their families, and families in isolation from their community and larger society. In addition, families—especially families having difficulty supporting their children's education—are often seen as deficient and in need of remediation. Three key tenets of the family-centered approach are:

1. The child must be viewed from an ecological perspective—that is, in the context of the family, community, and larger society.
2. Rather than diagnosing and remediating "the problem," professionals form partnerships with families—sharing knowledge, building trust, and developing goals and action plans based on family strengths and values.

3. Both families and children need supportive environments for healthy development.

The activities in these workshops are designed to engage participants in a collaborative learning process that will both connect with participants' prior experience and be applicable to their work with families. We are sure that your skills as a group facilitator will help make the workshops a productive, enjoyable learning experience for all involved.

Introduction

Consider for a moment today's popular adages about schools and social service agencies: "Parents are their child's first and most important teacher." "If we want healthy communities, we need healthy families." "Effective teaching addresses the needs of the whole child." Now consider the reality—the fact that educators and service providers often have little opportunity to work cooperatively with families to enhance outcomes for children. The goal of this project is to assist educators and human service workers to form effective and supportive partnerships with each other and with the families they serve.

This four-part training module, *Working Respectfully with Families: A Practical Guide for Educators and Human Service Workers*, was developed by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Child, Family, and Community Program. The modules are based on an ecological, family-centered approach to education and service delivery. This approach represents an integration of research and theory from developmental psychology and sociology, with experiential knowledge from social work, family support, early intervention, and early childhood education. Each workshop explores practical approaches to developing relationships with families, building the community environment, and linking families with community support. The training sessions include the following workshops:

The goal of this project is to assist educators and human service workers to form effective and supportive partnerships with each other and with the families they serve.

I. The Child, the Family, and the Community

II. Developing Partnerships with Families

III. Creating Family-Friendly Schools

IV. Home, School, and Community Partnerships

Working Respectfully with Families will be used to train state cadres in each of five Northwest states: Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Alaska, and

Washington. The cadres will be composed of administrators, social service personnel, teachers, and others who work with families. They, in turn, will offer trainings to schools and social service agencies in their states.

Each module contains a training outline with procedures, activities, overhead masters, handouts, and key articles. The paper, "The Ecology of the Family: A Background Paper for a Family-Centered Approach to Education and Social Services Delivery," is also provided. It synthesizes research and theoretical information on the ecological perspective. Participants should read this paper prior to the first workshop. Presenters should be familiar with the content of the background paper before planning and implementing the workshop.

The first workshop, The Child, the Family, and the Community, presents the philosophical underpinnings of an ecological, strength-based approach; the next three workshops explore the practical applications for this approach. Because it is essential that participants are grounded in the research and theories that are the basis of a family-centered approach, the first workshop is a prerequisite for the next three. Interested persons may attend all four workshops or a combination of the first workshop and any other workshop(s).

Overview of Workshop III

Creating Family-Friendly Schools

This workshop focuses on the importance of family involvement in their children's education. Drawing on their own experience, participants explore ways to involve families, benefits of family involvement, research findings, tenets of effective programs, barriers to effective involvement, and strategies to overcome the barriers.

Particular emphasis is placed on reaching out to hard-to-reach families. Low-income, minority, and limited-English proficient parents may face numerous barriers when they attempt to collaborate with schools. These include: insufficient time and energy, language barriers, feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, lack of understanding about the structure of the school and accepted communication channels, cultural incongruity, race and class biases on the part of school personnel, and perceived lack of welcome by teachers and administrators.

Particular emphasis is placed on reaching out to hard-to-reach families. Low-income, minority, and limited-English proficient parents may face numerous barriers when they attempt to collaborate with schools.

Schools that have successfully included hard-to-reach families operate on the assumption that it is not families that are hard to reach, but schools that are hard for parents to reach. Participants are encouraged to share strategies and to help each other overcome barriers to effective family involvement. Following are just a few examples of ways to involve parents. They are based on the five types of family involvement identified by Joyce Epstein of the Baltimore School and Family Connections Project.

1. **Basic obligations of families, parenting skills, and home conditions to support learning:** parent education workshops, family literacy activities, referrals to social service agencies, adult education, opportunities for parents to get to know and support each other.

2. **Communications from school to home on school and children's programs:** open-door policy, flexible scheduling, friendly newsletters, family nights (providing interpreters and baby-sitting increase success), home visits, conferences, informal coffees and teas, hot lines, phone calls, parent reading, writing groups.

3. **Volunteers at the school:** sharing a cultural perspective, skill, hobby, or occupation; reading with one or more children (in one or more languages); providing individual attention to a child; serving as an interpreter.

4. **Learning activities at home:** interactive homework, sharing a book, storytelling.

5. **School decisionmaking:** governance, committees, parent organizations.

A caveat: It is important to note that, in our efforts to involve families, we take care not to add to the stress of overburdened parents by expecting more involvement than they can comfortably manage. When parents express interest in their child's school day and ensure that their child comes to school on time, they are making important contributions to their child and school.

Creating Family-Friendly Schools

Contents and Time Frame

I.	**INTRODUCTION**	50 minutes
	A. Icebreaker	
	B. Practice and Applications	
	C. Review of a Family-Centered Approach	
	D. Reasons to Involve Families in Schools	
II.	**FAMILY INVOLVEMENT**	45 minutes
	A. Identifying Benefits of Family Involvement	
	B. Types of Family Involvement	
	C. Why Some Families May be Reluctant to Participate in Schools	
	D Research on Family Involvement	
III.	**BARRIER-BUSTING ACTIVITY**	45 minutes
IV.	**CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS**	10 minutes
V.	**SUMMARY**	5 minutes
VI.	**WRAP-UP AND NEXT STEPS**	5 minutes
	A. Next Steps	
	B. Practice and Applications	

Creating Family-Friendly Schools

Materials

Required Reading

"The Ecology of the Family: A Background Paper for a Family-Centered Approach to Service Integration," prepared by Christie Connard

Overheads

WIII-O1. A Family-Centered Approach

WIII-O2. Benefits of Family Involvement

WIII-O3. Research on Family Involvement

WIII-O4. Basic Tenets of Successful Programs

WIII-O5. Environments, Relationships, and Linkages

Handouts

WIII-H1. A Family-Centered Approach

WIII-H2. A Family-Centered Approach—Key Points

WIII-H3. Benefits of Family Involvement

WIII-H4. Research on Family Involvement

WIII-H5. Basic Tenets of Successful Programs

WIII-H6. Environments, Relationships, and Linkages

WIII-H7. Guidelines for Family-Friendly Schools: Self-Assessment

Participant Packet

1. Background Paper: "The Ecology of the Family: A Background Paper for a Family-Centered Approach to Education and Social Service Delivery"
2. Articles
3. Handouts
4. Description and Objectives of the Workshop
5. Sample Agenda

Key Articles for Workshop III

Benard, B. (1993). Fostering resiliency in kids. *Educational Leadership*, November.

Chavkin, N.F. (1993-94). Developing family and community involvement policies: Guidelines for school districts. *Family Resource Coalition Report*, No. 3 & 4.

Connard, C. (1989). Collaborative leadership for parent groups. *Family Resource Coalition Report*, No. 3.

Healey, P.M. (1994). Parent education: Going from defense to offense. *Principal*, March.

Heleen, O. (1992). Is your school family-friendly? *Principal*, November.

McKnight, J. (1989). Parents are experts on their children. *Education Week*, IX(13).

National Center for Children in Poverty. (1995). Number of poor children under six increased from 5 to 6 million, 1989-1992. 5(1).

National Statistics on Wealth and Poverty. Compiled by NWREL, 1995.

Ribas, W. (1992). Helping teachers communicate with parents. *Principal*, November.

Creating Family-Friendly Schools

About this Workshop

This three-hour workshop discusses the implications of the ecological, strength-based model presented in Parts I and II for creating family-friendly schools. Benefits of parental involvement, types of parental involvement, and basic tenets of effective parental involvement are discussed. "The Ecology of the Family: A Background Paper for a Family-Centered Approach to Education and Social Service Delivery" contains a detailed description of the ecological model. Participants should read this paper before attending the workshop.

Workshop Objectives

As a result of this training, participants will:

1. Understand the implications of the ecological model for developing strong linkages between families and schools.
2. Increase their understanding of meaningful, inclusive family involvement.
3. Understand some of the benefits of family involvement.
4. Identify barriers to effective involvement and strategies to overcome them.

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Creating Family-Friendly Schools

Training Outline

I. INTRODUCTION 50 minutes

Purpose: *To provide an overview and orient participants to content and expectations of the workshop.*

Directions to Presenter

1. Introduce yourself and others.
2. Review any housekeeping information such as rest rooms, parking validation, location of nearest coffee shop, etc.; and ground rules such as raising your hand or talking freely.
3. Go over the agenda topics and training objectives.

A. Icebreaker

Purpose: *To activate prior knowledge of participants and to connect the training content with participants' personal experience.*

Directions to Presenter

1. Introduce the topic by saying: "As a way of beginning, let's look for a moment at the special expertise parents have about their children."
2. Ask: "How many of you are parents? Those of you who are not will need to think about a child you know well or use your imaginations."
3. Ask participants to discuss the following with a partner: Identify the special things that you, as a parent, know about your child. Now identify how those special things would help the child succeed in school if her teacher was aware of them. Allow 15 minutes for discussion.
4. Ask participants to share some of their ideas. Ask: "What important things do you know about your children that teachers or other professionals do not know?"

Key Points

- Parents have important information and expertise in regard to their children which is often ignored, discounted, or not communicated.
- We need to develop strategies to draw this information from parents so it can be used to benefit their children.

B. Practice and Applications

Purpose: *To connect the content of Workshop I or II with the current workshop; to provide participants an opportunity to discuss their experience in applying concepts in their personal and work contexts.*

Directions to Presenter

1. Ask participants to discuss with a partner their experience with the practice and applications assignment from Workshop I or II.
   - **Workshop I Assignment.** Ask participants to go back to their school, home, or agency and practice a family-centered, strength-based approach with at least one family or person and/or try to identify situations where this approach might work. Are there systemic and/or other barriers to using this approach?
   - **Workshop II Assignment.** Ask participants to 1) practice identifying strengths in people and families; 2) identify examples of medical model and ecological model situations and approaches; 3) think of a time when they needed support—What support did they have? What was helpful, not helpful, and why?
2. Ask participants to share their experiences.

C. Review of a Family-Centered Approach

Purpose: *To review the main points of a family-centered approach.*

Directions to Presenter

WIII-O1

1. Place **Overhead WIII-O1** on the overhead (A Family-Centered Approach).

WIII-H1, WIII-H2

2. Refer participants to **Handout WIII-H1** (same as overhead) and **Handout WIII-H2** (A Family-Centered Approach—Key Points).

3. Remind participants of Workshop I and II and discuss.

Key Points

- A family-centered approach uses an ecological model which requires us to stop thinking of children in isolation. The child is viewed in the context of the family, community, and larger society.
- A family-centered approach is a systems approach—social, interpretive, and relational—rather than individualistic and objective. (Presenter: refer to mobile and show a real mobile. Ask: If something happens to one part, what happens to the rest?)
- Professionals need to understand the nature of the family system, the needs and competing responsibilities of family members. Professionals must take care not to undermine or upset the balance of the family system.
- Human beings actively organize, understand, and give meaning to their lives. Effective interventions build on and enhance a child's and family's strengths and resources.
- Each family has unique strengths, characteristics, and priorities. Parent-professional relationships must be flexible and supportive of family preferences, strengths, and culture.
- Children do best when families, schools, and communities work in mutually beneficial partnerships. Schools and communities are strengthened when families receive the support they need to nurture their children. (Presenter: Use the net metaphor here. Show a doll resting comfortably in a net.)

D. Reasons to Involve Families in Schools

Purpose: *To discuss the reasons for the increased emphasis on family involvement.*

Directions to Presenter

1. Ask participants why there is a focus currently on family involvement in their children's education.

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2. Discuss and chart responses.
3. Ask participants about their community demographics, e.g., percent of single parents, children living in poverty, percent unemployed, dual-worker families.
4. Chart responses.

Key Points

- Shifts in demographics have dramatically altered the socioeconomic composition of today's students. More than 25 percent of all children under six are poor, and more than 33 percent of all infants and toddlers are poor. Poor children confront a host of social and economic problems which put them at risk for school failure.
- Many families are struggling to meet competing obligations of work and family.
- Parents are their children's first teachers and have a lifelong influence on their children's learning.

II. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT 45 minutes

Purpose: *To discuss the benefits and types of family involvement.*

A. Identifying Benefits of Family Involvement

Directions to Presenter

1. Say to the group: "A number of benefits of family involvement have been identified in research. As practitioners, you can probably think of many benefits, but you might also think of some challenges.
2. Form groups of six to eight people.
3. Ask the group to assign roles—recorder and presenter.
4. Ask the group to brainstorm: "What are the benefits of family involvement in their children's education? Can you think of any disadvantages of family involvement?"
5. Ask the groups to report back, without duplication.
6. Create a master list of benefits and challenges on chart pack.
7. Ask participants to remember their list of challenges for the final activity, which identifies barriers to family involvement and strategies to overcome them.

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WIII-H3 **WIII-O2**

8. Place **Overhead WIII-O2** on the overhead (Benefits of Family Involvement).
9. Ask participants to refer to **Handout WIII-H3** (same as overhead).
10. Check to see if the group identified the benefits of family involvement.

Key Point

- Family involvement benefits all levels of the ecological system—child, family, community, and society.

B. Types of Family Involvement

Purpose: *To discuss ways that families can be involved in their children's education and ways to encourage open communication and participation.*

Directions to Presenter

1. Ask the group to brainstorm ways that families can be involved in their children's education. These do not have to be school-specific, only possibilities.
2. Chart responses, using a colored pen.
3. Say: "There are many ways to make families welcome in your school and ways to encourage open communication and participation."
4. Ask "What are some of the positive ways you and your school interact with and involve families?"
5. Chart responses, using a different colored pen.

C. Why Some Families May be Reluctant to Participate in Schools

Purpose: *To activate prior knowledge of participants and to connect the training content with participants' personal experience.*

Directions to Presenter

1. Ask the group to think of a time when they felt like an outsider, e.g., in another country, another culture, at a party, at school, at work, etc.

2. Ask each participant to discuss with a partner how they felt.
3. Debrief by asking participants to share some of their experiences.
4. Ask: "What types of parental involvement usually include low-income and minority families? Why might some parents feel uncomfortable at school?
5. Chart responses, using a colored pen.
6. Explain that this list will be used as a guide during the final activity when participants identify barriers to family involvement in their children's education and strategies to overcome them.

D. Research on Family Involvement

Purpose: *To become familiar with research findings on family involvement.*

Directions to Presenter

WIII-H4 **WIII-O3**

1. Place **Overhead WIII-O3** on the overhead (Research on Family Involvement).
2. Refer participants to **Handout WIII-H4** (same as overhead).
3. Discuss.

Key Points

- Most parents prefer informal, personal attention in parent-teacher relationships. Parents frequently identify the quality of the relationship as being more important than the type of service or information provided.
- The most effective forms of parent involvement are those which engage parents in working directly with children on learning activities in the home.
- Children from low-income and minority families have the most to gain when parents are involved. Parents do not have to be well educated to make a difference.
- The earlier in a child's educational process parental involvement begins, the more powerful the effects will be.
- It is important that we not add to the stress of overburdened parents by expecting more involvement than they can comfortably manage. Parents who ensure that their children are to school on time and who show interest in their child's school day are engaged in important forms of parental involvement.

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III. BARRIER-BUSTING ACTIVITY 45 minutes

Purpose: *To identify barriers to effective family involvement and strategies to overcome them.*

Directions to Presenter

1. Introduce the small group activity by saying: "There are many barriers to strong linkages between home and school. Some of these barriers originate in families and some originate in schools—in policies, administrators, and teachers.
2. "Think about some of the barriers families might encounter in becoming involved in their children's education.
3. "Now think about your own personal experiences with parents and barriers which you have encountered. If you haven't encountered any barriers, use your imagination."
4. Form groups of six to eight people. Assign each group a letter (A, B, C).

Step One

- Ask each group to refer to the brainstormed list of ways to involve parents.
- Ask each group to identify a recorder and reporter.
- On chart paper, identify a) barriers that originate in families, and b) barriers that originate in schools.
- Ask the group to record the barriers on a chart.
- Allow the groups to work for 30 minutes.

Step Two

- Introduce this step by saying: "Sometimes other people can see ways to remove barriers that we miss."
- Ask each group to trade barrier charts—A goes to B; B goes to C, etc.
- Ask each group to identify and write down ways to reduce or eliminate the barriers to effective parental involvement.

5. Ask each group to share their chart of barriers and barrier busters.
6. Post these charts.

Key Points

- Family/professional relationships must be supportive of family strengths and culture as well as responsive to the family interests and concerns.
- Professionals can facilitate the development of family-to-family support by providing a welcoming, accepting school climate and enjoyable activities for family participation.

IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS 10 minutes

Purpose: *To discuss the basic tenets of effective programs.*

Directions to Presenter

WIII-H5 **WIII-O4**

1. Place **Overhead WIII-O4** on the overhead (Basic Tenets of Successful Programs).
2. Refer participants to **Handout WIII-H5** (same as overhead).
3. Introduce the overhead by saying: "Researchers have identified a number of characteristics of effective family involvement programs. Although they have different components, they share several fundamental perspectives."
4. Briefly discuss these key assumptions:
   - The first and most basic tenet is that parents are their children's first teachers and have a lifelong influence on their children's values, attitudes, and aspirations.
   - Children's educational success requires congruence between what is taught at school and the values expressed in the home.
   - Most parents—regardless of their economic status, educational level, or cultural background—care deeply about their children's education and can provide substantial support if given specific opportunities and knowledge.
   - Schools must take the lead in eliminating—or at least reducing—traditional barriers to parent involvement.

Key Point

- Family/professional partnerships permit a two-way flow of influence and enhance meaningful family involvement. As early childhood educator Barbara Bowman notes: "Only if parents and teachers can collaborate are children free to learn from both."

V. SUMMARY 5 minutes

Purpose: *To summarize the main points of the workshop.*

Directions to Presenter

WIII-H6 **WIII-O5**

1. Place **Overhead WIII-O5** on the overhead (Environments, Relationships, and Linkages)
2. Refer participants to **Handout WIII-H6** (same as overhead)

Key Points

- A family-centered approach views the child in the context of the family, the community, and the larger society.
- Parents gain information and support from group settings that are collaborative and participatory.

VI. WRAP-UP AND NEXT STEPS 5 minutes

Purpose: *To introduce the next workshop and to give out practice and applications.*

A. Next Steps

Directions to Presenter

1. Discuss the next steps in the training.

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Key Points

- This is the third of four workshops on a family-centered approach.
- The fourth workshop will focus on creating home, school, and community partnerships.

B. Practice and Applications

Directions to Presenters

WIII-H7

1. Give out follow-up exercises: Using **Handout WIII-H7** (Guidelines for Family-Friendly Schools: Self-Assessment), rate your school or agency in partnership with your PTA or parent advisory group.
2. Ask participants to fill out the evaluations.

Handouts

A FAMILY-CENTERED APPROACH . . .

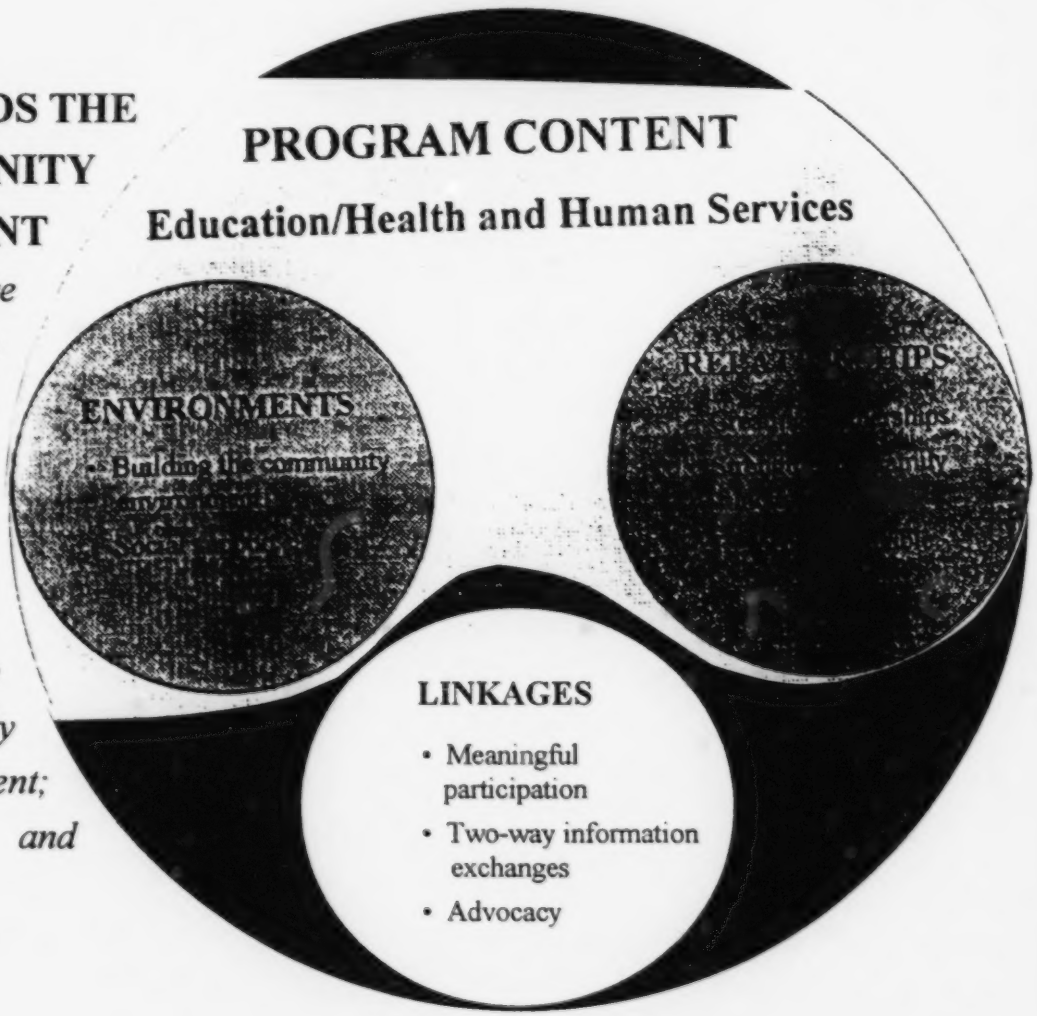
CREATES HELPING AND PARTNERSHIP RELATIONSHIPS,

because families are supported and child development is enhanced through helping and partnership relationships:

Handouts

BUILDS THE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT

because families gain information, resources, and support through their connections to the community environment; and



LINKS FAMILIES TO COMMUNITY RESOURCES

because participation, two-way information exchanges, and advocacy strengthens both the community support network and family functioning.

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A FAMILY-CENTERED APPROACH: KEY POINTS

- A family-centered approach uses an ecological model which requires us to stop thinking of children in isolation. The child is viewed in the context of the family, the community, and larger society.

- A family-centered approach is a "systems" approach: social, interpretive, and relational, rather than individualistic and objective.

- Professionals need to understand the nature of the family system, the needs and competing responsibilities of family members. Professionals must take care not to undermine or upset the balance of the family system. (Think of the mobile metaphor here.)

- Human beings actively organize, understand, and give meaning to their lives. Effective interventions build on and enhance a child's and family's strengths and resources.

- Each family has unique strengths, characteristics, and priorities. Parent/professional relationship must be flexible and supportive of family preferences, strengths, and culture.

- Children do best when families, schools, and communities work together in mutually beneficial partnerships. Schools and communities are strengthened when families receive the support they need to nurture their children. (Think of the net metaphor here.)

BENEFITS OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

CHILD:

- Family involvement is positively related to achievement, leading directly to higher grades and test scores and better long-term academic achievement;
- The relationship between family involvement and affective outcomes is strong and positive, leading to more positive attitudes and behaviors.

FAMILY:

Family involvement leads to:

- Increased understanding of child development;
- Enhanced parenting skills from two sources: both parents and professionals sharing experience and information;
- Increased self-confidence in parenting;
- Move positive attitudes toward schools;
- Increased ability to serve as resources for the academic, social, and psychological development of their;
- Parents become acquainted with the school staff and other parents, increasing both formal and informal support.

SCHOOLS:

- Schools' support for families is reciprocated by family support for schools. Positive parent attitudes toward school and improved rapport increases parents' willingness to support schools with labor and resources;
- Children's improved attitudes, achievement, and behavior have a positive impact on schools.

COMMUNITIES:

- Schools, communities, and families are interdependent. Communities benefit when families are strong and children are well nurtured. Families benefit from strong, supportive communities structures. As John Bowlby observed, "If a community values its children, it must cherish their parents."

RESEARCH ON FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

- The most effective forms of family involvement are those which engage **parents in working directly with children on learning activities in the home**. Programs which involve parents in reading with their children, supporting their work on homework assignments, or tutoring them using materials and instructions provided by teachers, show particularly impressive results.

- Family involvement is most effective when it is **comprehensive, long-lasting, and well-planned**.

- Family involvement should be **developmental and preventive, promoting strengths** rather than remedial intervention.

- **School practices** to encourage parents to participate in their children's education are **more important than family characteristics**, such as the level of a parent's education or their socio-economic or marital status.

- Children from **low-income and minority families benefit most** when parents are involved in schools.

- Parents do ***not*** **have to be well-educated** to make a difference.

- When parents help their children with schoolwork, **the effects of poverty and the parents' lack of a formal education are reduced.**

- The **earlier family involvement begins** in a child's educational process, **the more powerful the effects will be**. Involving parents when children are young has beneficial effects which persist throughout the child's academic career.

- Family involvement **works for older children, too**, even if they have not been involved previously.

- Most parents prefer **informal, personal** attention in parent/teacher relationships.

- Parents **want and need direction** to participate with maximum effectiveness.

BASIC TENETS OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

- The first and most basic tenet is that parents are their children's first teachers and have a lifelong influence on their children's values, attitudes, and aspirations.

- Children's educational success requires congruence between the values that are taught at school and the values expressed in the home.

- Most parents, regardless of their level of education, economic status, or cultural background care deeply about their children's education and can provide substantial support if given specific opportunities and knowledge.

- Schools must take the lead in eliminating, or at least reducing, traditional barriers to parental involvement.

A FAMILY-CENTERED APPROACH . . .

- ▽ BUILDS THE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT

  because families gain information, resources, and support through their connections to the community environment.

  (ENVIRONMENT)

- ▽ CREATES PARTNERSHIPS

- ▽ STRENGTHENS FAMILY FUNCTIONING

- ▽ PROVIDES FLEXIBLE, TAILORED, RESPECTFUL SUPPORT

  because families are supported and child development is enhanced through helping and partnership relationships.

  (RELATIONSHIPS)

- ▽ LINKS FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

  because participation, two-way information exchanges, and advocacy strengthens both the community support network and family functioning.

  (LINKAGES)

GUIDELINES FOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY SCHOOLS

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Directions: Rate your school or agency on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being highest.

1. OUTREACH: In our school, we:

a. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Use a personal, face-to-face approach to recruit and invite;

b. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Help reluctant parents get involved by providing transportation or asking another parent to pick them up;

c. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Ask involved parents to make contact with parents who are less involved;

d. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Have staff or parent volunteers outside the school to greet parents as they drop off and pick-up their children;

e. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Design activities to be non-stigmatizing, non-threatening, and non-evaluative;

f. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Use child-focused or "fun" activities as early ice-breaking events;

g. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Schedule events to fit the availability and work hours of parents;

h. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Tailor events to specific, parent-identified needs or interests;

i. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Provide activities which have an incentive for participation -- make-and-take games, topics of immediate concern or practical application;

j. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Break barriers to participation (provide transportation, child care, whole-family activities);

k. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Keep trying, it takes time to get good press on the grapevine.

2. CLIMATE: In our school, we:

a. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Create a welcoming, accepting climate;

b. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Greet parents when they arrive;

c. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Create a welcoming reception area which contains information and directions so parents can find their way around;

d. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Have an orientation for new parents;

e. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Provide ways for non-English speaking parents to participate;

f. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Initiate frequent, informal contacts between staff and parents;

g. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Provide opportunities for informal socializing among parents and between parents and staff;

h. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Meet needs for physical comfort and emotional safety;

i. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Establish ground rules to create a safe, trusting atmosphere;

j. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Treat parents with respect;

k. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Give positive feedback and appreciation.

3. OPPORTUNITIES TO GET ACQUAINTED: In our school, we:

a. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Take time and provide structure for parents to get acquainted by using icebreakers, name tags, phone number lists, etc.;

b. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Offer informal opportunities for parents and staff to get to know one another;

c. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Help parents connect by providing opportunities to talk about personal interests, hobbies, etc.;

d. 1 2 3 4 5 ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Encourage and facilitate parents getting together outside the program or school;

e. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Include small group activities when large groups of parents meet.

4. REWARDING ADULT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES: In our school, we:

a. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Identify and address topics of parent interest and concern addressing professionally chosen topics;

b. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Be flexible enough to include the interests and concerns of parents as they emerge;

c. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Provide a variety of informational materials in various formats: printed, audio, video;

d. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Build on the life experiences, strengths, and capabilities of parents;

e. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Convey the message that parents are experts on their own children, then ask parents to share their expertise. We use the expertise and capabilities of parents by encouraging parent-to-parent information exchanges, as well as professional-parent exchanges;

f. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Help parents learn from one another through small group and cooperative learning activities;

g. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Offer parents opportunities to problem-solve with professionals and other parents;

h. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Use action-oriented activities and parent-oriented discussions rather than lectures.

5. COLLABORATIVE GROUP PROCESSES: In our school, we:

a. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Encourage parents to take ownership of the group by delegating responsibility for agendas, activities, and decisions to parents;

b. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Provide many different ways for parents to participate in the school;

c. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Give parent volunteers and leaders support, training, and recognition.

d. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Use group processes which help parents to work together.

e. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Establish ground rules to create a safe, trusting atmosphere.

f. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Make decisions by group consensus rather than by professionals.

g. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Have an agenda which is sufficiently flexible to address spur of the moment parent concerns or interests.

h. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Provide information, resources, and support -- but not solutions -- so parents can solve their own problems.

i. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Share leadership roles.

j. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Have group-centered (rather than leader-centered) discussions.

k. 1 2 3 4 5
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Deal with conflict openly and respectfully.

Articles

POLICY

Developing Family and Community Involvement Policies:

Guidelines for School Districts

by Nancy Feyl Chavkin

Crises in our schools and communities have caused leaders from diverse fields to "join forces" in the reform movement. Levy and Copple call this "a propitious time for collaboration because education and human services face common challenges as they try to help the same people and respond to the same problems."[1] The Council of Chief State School Officers says "the time is ripe" for "comprehensive family support, education and involvement efforts," and the National Coalition for an Urban Children's Agenda is asking schools and communities to define "desirable outcomes for children" because its ten members are deeply concerned about the plight of urban children and families.[2]

A recurrent theme in all three reports is that school districts cannot solve the problems of today's students alone. They must learn to collaborate with families and communities. A districtwide initiative in family and community involvement is a complex issue, and recent research can help school districts understand what policies are needed to ensure the success of these initiatives.

The Need for Policy

A study conducted by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory used a key-informant approach to identify and describe the essential elements of promising family and community involvement programs in five southwestern states. These essential elements began with two key components: written policies and administrative support for family involvement. The other elements all fit under the general umbrella of ways school districts helped support educators working with families. These additional elements included: training for staff and families; a partnership approach in every aspect of programming; two-way communication; networking within and outside the district; and evaluation. In each case, the school board set the official district policy on family and community involvement and then provided administrative support for policy implementation. Individual schools in the district developed their own strategies for implementation with support from the central office as necessary.[3]

The Institute for Responsive Education's research points out that because school districts have unique features which make them resistant to change, policies about family and community involvement are necessary. The goals of schools as organizations are diverse; the method of goal achievement is fragmented and responsibility is diffused among administrators, counselors, teachers, families, and students. In addition, the informal norms of schools are powerful, and the formal structure is complicated and not always well-coordinated. These organizational realities make the idea of family involvement in education an idea that is difficult both to introduce and to maintain without a formal, written policy. Davies suggests that a mandate for family involvement is essential. His work and studies by the Institute for Responsive Education clearly show that policy is a critical element if the natural organizational resistance to change is to be overcome.[4]

The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE) is dedicated to the development of family/school partnerships. This group of organizations used their broad and diverse experiences in working with teachers, administrators, families, and community leaders to develop general policy suggestions. Assuming that all family involvement policies are developed with input from teachers, administrators, families, students, people from youth-serving groups, and the community, NCPIE suggests that all policies should contain the following concepts:

- Opportunities for all families to become informed about how the family involvement program will be designed and carried out
- Participation of families who lack literacy skills or who do not speak English
- Regular information for families about their child's participation and progress in specific educational programs and the objectives of those programs
- Opportunities for families to assist in the instructional process at school and at home
- Professional development for teachers and staff to enhance their effectiveness with families
- Linkages with social service agencies and community groups to address key family and community issues
- Involvement of families of children at all ages and grade levels
- Recognition of diverse family structures, circumstances and responsibilities, including differences that might impede family participation. (The person(s) responsible for a child may not be the child's biological parent(s) and policies and programs should include participation by all persons interested in the child's educational progress.)[5]

Support for Policy

But policies alone are not enough. Policies only provide the framework; policies need to be supported by mechanisms for monitoring, enforcing, and providing technical assistance. District support for family and community involvement must occur during three critical stages. These stages are: 1) the development stage; 2) the implementa-

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tion stage; and 3.) the maintenance stage. Each of these stages is critical to ensuring the effectiveness of policy about family and community involvement; and support for policy needs to be considered during all three stages. Support is what helps a policy come into formal existence (development), what helps a policy translate into practical actions (implementation), and what helps us maintain the policy (maintenance).

Based on information from actual programs, the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education and the National School Boards Association both recommend several supports for policies for involving families in school activities during the development phase. These begin with assessing family needs and interests about ways of working with the schools and setting clear and measurable goals with family and community input. During this first stage, school districts must understand what a true partnership means. School districts need to see families and community members as equal partners and seek their input in developing a vision of their district's ideal family involvement program. Districts need to take the leadership role and reach out into communities and actively seek the involvement of families and community. [6]

Once a policy is adopted, school districts need to successfully implement it. NCPIE's keys to success at the implementation stage include a variety of strategies. Some suggestions that have worked for districts include the following:

- Hire and train a parent liaison to directly contact families and coordinate parent activities. If there is a non-English-speaking community, the liaison should be bilingual and sensitive to the needs of all families in the community.

- Develop public relations to inform families, businesses, and the community about parent involvement policies and programs through newsletters, slide shows, videotapes, local newspapers, and such.

- Recognize the importance of a community's historic, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural resources in generating interest in parent participation. Even when there are problems, such as desegregation issues, a parent involvement program can serve as a forum for discussion and a conduit for change.

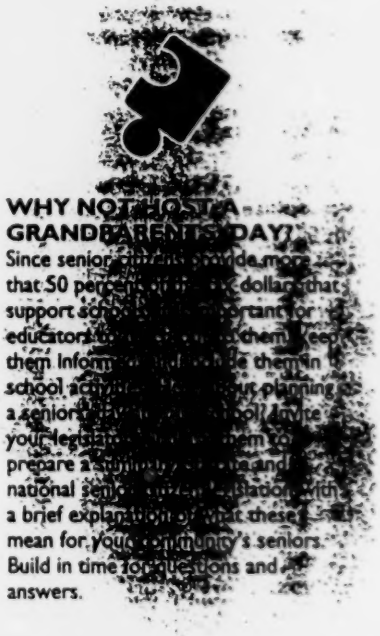
- Use creative forms of communication between educators and families. This may include parent/teacher conferences which yield individual parent/child and teacher/child plans, newsletters mailed to families, etc.

- Mobilize families as volunteers in the school assisting teachers with instructional tasks, assisting in the lunchroom, and helping with administrative office functions. Families might act as volunteer tutors, classroom aides, and invited speakers.

- Train educators to include techniques for surmounting barriers between families and schools so that teachers, administrators, and families act as partners. [7]

The maintenance stage, which follows the coming together of the partnership and the establishment of an official group, focuses on working together with all partners. The work of supporting policies about family and community involvement continues after policies are developed and implemented. In fact, most partnerships report that very difficult challenges arise during the maintenance stage.

To enhance the success of policies during the maintenance stage, NCPIE makes the following three recommendations. First, integrate information and assistance with other aspects of the total learning environment. Families should have access to information about such services as healthcare and nutrition programs provided by schools or community agencies. Second, schedule programs and activities flexibly to reach diverse family groups. Third, monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of family involvement programs and activities on a regular basis. [8]



WHY NOT HOST A GRANDPARENTS' DAY?

Since senior citizens provide more that 50 percent of the dollars that support scho portant for educators to them keep them Inform de them in school activ out planning a senior poll/vote your legisla em to prepare a and national seni lation with a brief explanation of what these mean for your community's seniors. Build in time for questions and answers.

Critical Policy Issues

Any discussion of districtwide policy must include consideration of three critical issues: budget/resource allocations, assessment of outcomes, and the collaboration process.

All districtwide reform efforts cost some money and the perennial question is: Where will the money come from? As the authors of *Principals Speak* write, the answer can be found in the word priorities. [9] Our schools, even in times of high expenditures, have not spent very much money on family and community involvement. If we really believe family and community involvement are linked to student success, we must stop giving lip service to partnerships and allocate modest sums for staff development, outreach, and coordination activities.

Of course, some of the goals of family and community involvement can be accomplished without new district dollars; resource reallocation can help. Schools can reassign teachers and staff. They can use existing staff development time for training on family and community involvement. Schools also can seek additional funding from local businesses, foundations, and community groups.

State and federal funding are other possible sources of support. One promising place to look for funding is federal Chapter 1. Districts might review their priorities for the use of Chapter 1 funds and see whether continuing to spend these funds on remedial instruction is in the best interest of students. This money might be used more productively if invested in mobilizing home-school-community resources to help children. The recent U.S. Department of Education's publication on flexibility in using Chapter 1 funds supports this idea. [10] In addition, school districts should consider other special funding sources, including special education funds, drug education funds, funds for at-risk youth, and dropout prevention funds.

In order to obtain budget/resource allocations for family and community involvement, it is important to be clear about the outcomes of these activities—to specify measurable goals, and to delineate the procedure for determining when goals have been reached. Describ the expected outcomes. Look beyond inputs (who was served, what services

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were provided) and move toward examining outcomes. Districts might consider health and wellbeing, development, decrease in deviant behavior, and satisfaction as possible outcomes. Defining outcomes for partnership programs is a difficult process because they combine the elements of education, social service, and community activities. Nevertheless, defining outcomes is critical to the success of family-school partnerships.

After defining outcomes, districts must measure them. Palanki and Burch suggest seven ways districts can evaluate whether their policies related to families and communities are effective. They suggest policies need to be evaluated by looking at flexibility, intensity, continuity, universality, participation, coordination, and comprehensiveness.[11]

To measure outcomes of these types of practices, assessment methods will need to change. Most of the current assessments used by districts measure inputs rather than outputs. Assessments in current family and community involvement programs typically count how many people attended instead of measuring the quality of their interactions with the school. But quality is at least as important as quantity. Some districts are now incorporating assessment about family and community involvement in the annual performance reviews of both teachers and administrators. Changes in attitudes and perceptions of both families and teachers should occur and be measurable. A "vignette" approach and other qualitative measurement techniques may work best and also provide the most insight for districts. Districts need to continue to develop accountability systems that accurately assess outcomes for collaboration and coordination activities.

Collaboration is also an important issue. Districts must work with all groups in a community to ensure that students and their families have access to needed health and social services, employment, food, and housing so that students come to school ready to learn. Determining how to make these services accessible—whether schools link students and their families to needed services or whether these services are provided at the school—will require new roles and commitments. Districts must be sensitive to racial, ethnic, and economic differences, as well as language and literacy obstacles because insensitivity inhibits both communication and collaboration. Too often this lack of sensitivity prevents effective interaction with families and the community.[12]

School district staff will have to learn to coordinate with staff in other systems. Districts will need to examine existing job descriptions and reward systems. Each school needs to have available a wide range of activities, service directories, and resource materials. Districts should consider locating some community services or community personnel in school buildings. They will want to hire school social workers and family-community coordinators to link families with the school and community services.

Whenever possible, districts need to work with nearby teacher training institutions to assure preservice training in family and community involvement and the collaboration process. Higher education institutions may also be able to provide districtwide in-service training that meets the needs of local teachers, community members, and families.

It is difficult to get collaborative programs underway. Each system has a different governance structure. Regulations and time schedules often conflict. Professional practices such as intake forms, budget cycles, confidentiality rules, and reimbursement plans are often contradictory and cause disagreements. These differences are not insurmountable, but school districts require time to work out these problems with other agencies. Collaborative programs can be successful when a district has a strong policy about family and community involvement and provides support for it.

Recommendations

Policy can set the direction by clarifying the definition of family and community involvement and setting priorities and guidelines for the various groups from home, school, and community. Policy alone is not enough: support for policy is critical for the development, implementation, and maintenance of districtwide family and community involvement. Districts will need to invest some resources; school boards need to consider new dollars and personnel and reallocation of existing dollars and staff. Most schools do not reach out to families and communities. For them to do so, a paradigm shift is required. Family and community involvement must be a districtwide effort backed by a strong policy and support for that policy during the development, implementation, and maintenance stages.

We must mobilize committed families, schools, and communities to work together to improve education. New or revised districtwide policies can marshal federal, state, and local resources to help schools work with families and communities. Clearly, change is within our reach. Districts can and must examine the ways school district policies involve families and communities in education.

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Is Your School Family-Friendly?

There are a number of ways to effectively link schools with families and communities.

Owen Heleen

Marie Bastone

A principal I work with put it succinctly: "In these times, if you care for the child, you have to care for the family. If you care for the family, you have to reach out to the community. We can't reach our academic goals unless we help our community address social and economic needs."

Owen Heleen is vice president of the Institute for Responsive Education and dissemination director for the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning.

All over the country, schools are redefining themselves as community institutions. Too often in the past, schools have not seen themselves in this role. Buffered by their separate budgets and the manner in which their "clients" are assigned, schools have been remarkably static in their view of family-community-school relationships, continuing to operate as if they were still serving Ozzie and Harriet's children. The last several years, however, have seen the development of a promising array of new strategies, policies, and mindsets that could significantly change the traditional family-community partnership.

Involving the Whole Village

In an era of diminishing resources and increasing pressure for improved outcomes for our young people, the strengthening of family-community-school partnerships has become a hot topic. However, like many hot topics, this one is too often filled with hot air.

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Judith Emmert

We say that parent and community involvement can lead to better outcomes for kids. But instead of building a system in which people can truly participate in various ways, we run one-shot, add-on programs that ensure only tangential involvement.

However, some schools and communities are taking a different approach. They understand that it takes a long-term effort, involving many kinds of people in many kinds of roles, to have any real impact. They understand the African proverb, "It takes a whole village to educate a child," and they try to enlist the community—the whole village—in their effort.

Essentially, this effort involves three kinds of work for educators: Expanding our vision of family and community involvement; building new kinds of "doors" and "windows" in our schools; and developing new mindsets about families, communities, and schools. One example of such an effort is the League of Schools Reaching Out, a network of 75 schools coordinated by the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE). The schools work with IRE and with one another to further the development of programs of family and community involvement, the goal being success for all children.

Too often, however, our picture of family and community involvement is fuzzy or ill-defined, falling into stereotypical concepts that have little impact on student achievement. Any narrow definition of involvement renders it feeble, and focusing on just one kind of involvement is not a winning strategy. Joyce Epstein, co-director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning, has mapped out six different types of family-community-school collaboration (*see box*).

Programs that Work

A recent survey examined 42 urban schools that have specifically targeted family-community partnerships as priority needs. It found that the most successful schools had developed "broad" or "deep" participation programs.

One such school, the Matthew Sherman Elementary School in San Diego, California, helps families become more involved by providing training and support through parent education workshops, home visits, after-school day care, and referrals for social services. The school combines traditional communication strategies, such as parent-teacher conferences and report cards, with innovative strategies, including phone conferences with parents who cannot attend regular conferences, and quarterly meetings of teachers and parents to discuss collaborative objectives. The school encourages whole-family learning at home by lending parents books and materials.

The survey also found that the school's support for families is reciprocated by family support for the school. The independent Organization of Latino Parents (OLP) leads this support by training parents to help their children at home and by advocating on behalf of the school and the multilingual community to the board of education. Partly as a result of OLP efforts, the school now uses Spanish-language tests as alternatives to English-language standardized achievement tests.

Parents serve on a school council that makes decisions about curriculum, budget, personnel, and parent/community involvement, and on a team that coordinates many of the family-involvement activities at the school and facilitates the home visit program.

Expanding Involvement

In reviewing the most recent research on family-community involvement, Epstein has added three important attributes to successful broad-based programs:

1. *Effective partnership practices are developmental* because the interests and needs of families change as children grow, and because the partnership is itself a relationship with its own life course. Like any relationship, it must be purposefully nurtured and sustained.

2. *Effective partnership practices must be responsive to both common and unique family needs.* There is no such thing as a model family or community involvement program. Every successful program must be rooted in its own distinctive school community, and the most important operating principle is that of inclusiveness, especially the traditionally "hard to reach" families.

3. *Students must be key participants.* It is important to keep kids in the center of family involvement programs. Most principals know that the best-attended school events are those in which children perform or show their work. Similarly, making more children more successful must be the preeminent goal of all family program activity.

How do you get started with family and community involvement? A good way to begin is by building new ways to get new people involved in the life of your school. Develop strategies that provide symbolic doors and windows to the school.

Parent Centers

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1978) writes, "The presence of parents can transform the culture of a school." She is right. In many schools, parent centers are low-cost success stories, making possible a continu-

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ing and positive physical presence of family members, including paid parent coordinators and their younger children, unpaid volunteers, parent visitors simply dropping in for coffee and a chat, and parents enrolled in center-sponsored ESL and GED classes. Parents report feeling more positive about the school, and more involved in their child's education, when they have a welcoming "place of their own" in the building.

The requirements of a workable parent center are simple: An available space; some adult-size tables and chairs; a paid staff of parents (Chapter 1 and other federal and state program funds may be available for this purpose); a telephone that can also be used by teachers to call parents and arrange field trips; and a coffee pot and hot water for tea.

What can a parent center do? The range of potential activity is nearly endless: ESL classes; GED classes and support groups; grade-level breakfasts; fathers' breakfasts; referral services; clothing exchanges; lending libraries for educational toys, games, and videos; meetings of community advocacy groups; immunization services; school registration; computer classes; and health clinics—to name but a few of the activities that various schools have undertaken. A school in San Fernando, California, is exploring the possibility of using its parents' center as a "one-stop" facility for family and community social services.

Home Visits

For many educators, family involvement still means parents coming to the school for meetings, conferences, and other activities. Urban parents' interest in their children is often judged on the basis of how often they come to the school—a standard most middle-class parents would reject. Home visitor programs are erroneously seen as the province of social workers or truant officers.

Successful family involvement programs must have a strong component of outreach to families at home, on their own turf. Many urban families will not come to the school, or will come only when summoned about their children's problems. There are many reasons for this—conflicting work schedules, low interest or lack of experience in group activities and meetings, shyness or fear about school-based activities, negative personal experiences with schooling, and barriers of language and culture.

"Successful family involvement programs must have a strong component of outreach to families at home..."

Drawing from the Family Matters program at Cornell University and the Parents As Teachers program in Missouri, we have helped several schools fashion practical home visitor programs that stress family strengths, family empowerment, and the building of informal neighborhood networks. The major elements of such a program are: Paid parent support workers, selected on the basis of previous experience in counseling or training in community settings; systematic training, supervision, and support; services that provide information about school programs, demonstrate positive ways to work with children, and offer referrals to health and social service agencies; and meetings between teachers and home visitors to exchange information and ideas.

Action Research Teams

A third easily replicable idea is to involve parents and teachers directly in studying home-school relationships and devising actions to improve them. At IRE, we are working intensively with parent-teacher action research teams in nine schools to help them design, implement, analyze, and evaluate their own small-scale family-community-school "interventions." Too often, teachers and administrators wait for reformers, experts, or the central office to tell them what they should do. Parent-teacher action research teams provide a simple structure for combining reflective inquiry and action in the areas that each school believes are most relevant.

Six Types of Family-Community-School Collaboration

Joyce Epstein of The Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning has categorized six types of activities found to be most effective in helping schools structure family and community involvement programs.

School Help for Families. Schools provide assistance to families in meeting the families' basic obligations: Children's health and safety; supervision, discipline, and guidance of children; and positive home conditions that support school learning and appropriate behavior.

School-Home Communication. Schools have a basic obligation to communicate to the family information about school programs and children's progress by means of letters, memos, phone calls, report cards, newsletters, conferences, and other means.

Family Help for Schools. This is the involvement of parent and community volunteers who assist teachers, administrators, and children in school, as well as those parents and others who come to school to support and watch student performances and other activities.

Involvement in Learning Activities at Home. These activities include both parent-initiated and child-initiated requests for help, particularly ideas from teachers to help parents assist their children in activities coordinated with classroom instruction.

Involvement in Governance, Decision Making, and Advocacy. Parents and other community residents are involved in advisory, decision making, or advocacy roles in parent associations, advisory committees, school site councils, or advocacy groups that monitor schools or work for school improvement.

Collaboration and Exchanges with the Community. This includes involvement with community institutions that share responsibility for children's development and success, particularly those that provide support services for children and their families.

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New Mindsets

Parent centers, home visits, and action research teams are just a beginning, a few of the doors and windows that can attract families to the school, reach other families at home, and engage teachers in improving curriculum and instruction through closer connections with parents and community resources. There are many other strategies, and we can hope that as new kinds of relationships are developed, new kinds of mindsets will follow. These include the beliefs that:

- *All* children can learn.
- *All* parents care about their children and want to help them.
- Changes in school and family conditions can enhance the social and academic development of children.
- It is appropriate for schools to serve as brokers for, and bridges to community resources that can aid children and families.
- Although families and teachers have many overlapping roles and responsibilities, they can help each other and do not need to be competitors.
- Teachers and parents can work together to study and act on problems, helping to link the classroom and the home.
- The social and academic development of children is enhanced when school, family, and neighborhood find ways to communicate, join forces, and become partners in the children's interest.

Building a broad-based program of family-community-school partnerships; finding innovative ways to make new partnership connections; and working to embody new ways of thinking in whatever we do—these are the ingredients that make up the family-friendly school. □

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Helping Teachers Communicate with Parents

There's no reason why the principal should have to be the mediator between "us and them."

William B. Ribas

Elementary school principals constantly wrestle with problems of teacher morale caused by the stress of working with demanding parents. While you can't fault parents for wanting the best education possible for their children, their behavior can often lead to an "us and them" mentality regarding teachers. This places principals in situations requiring a tremendous amount of time and energy in order to improve relationships between parents and teachers.

If principals are to be successful in this effort, it is imperative that they cultivate direct and effective communication between parents and teachers. Otherwise the principals become permanent links in chains of communication between parents and teachers, which can devour much of their time.

In interviews with parents and teachers in two suburban communities, I found that many teachers felt stress because of their inability to meet parents' expectations for frequent and lengthy conversations. They wished they could be more efficient and effective in communicating with parents without having to commit more of their time to the process.

Other teachers, however, felt that they had been successful in their efforts to keep parents informed, and they had a number of suggestions for improving parent-teacher communication. I offer some of these suggestions, in the teachers' own words, to principals in the hope that, by helping your teachers communicate more effectively with parents, you will also help yourselves by reducing the time you spend as go-betweens.

Lana Drake

Make parents feel comfortable.

You don't want to present yourself as: "I'm the Almighty. Sit and listen to me. I know all." They've known the child longer than you have. Build on what parents know; what they're feeling; what they're thinking. Build them up so they

William B. Ribas is principal of William Mitchell Elementary School in Needham, Massachusetts.

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don't feel inferior or uninformed. Involve them and make them feel important and needed.

Be a good listener.

Don't have set agendas. Let the parents take the ball first. Say to them, "Before I share my observations with you, is there anything that you would like to share with me, or that you would like to ask about first?"

Be positive.

No matter how difficult the child is, and no matter how serious the problems are, always find positive things to say. Parents want to hear something good, even though their kid may be struggling. It gives them the strength to deal with what needs help. You could say something like, "He's really struggling right now, but I can see that some things are beginning to improve, and maybe if we work together..." Don't let parents leave a conference feeling that their kid is headed nowhere. Think of something to make them feel hopeful.

Be careful how you phrase negative information.

Teachers need to learn phrases to describe, for example, the kid who never shuts his mouth: "When we are doing story telling, he really does have a lot to say and it's wonderful, but..." or, "He is so interested in what everybody's saying, he wants to have conversations with them," or, "He has a hard time waiting his turn; he's so full of information that he can't wait to share it with everyone."

Have telephones available.

If you're running to make a quick phone call to a parent on your 15-minute recess, and the line's busy, there goes that call until three o'clock. We really don't have enough access to telephones...Schools should provide cordless phones that would permit teachers to make calls from their classrooms when students are not present.

Be prepared.

Anytime I have prepared my information in writing, and have what I want in front of me, nine times out of ten the conference seems to go better. Even if it's just brief notes or an outline, have the facts before you and be ready to share them.

> ***"It's so easy for the teacher to sit in her neat, little classroom and tell parents what they need to do..."***

Be sensitive to parents' problems.

It's so easy for the teacher to sit in her neat, little classroom and tell parents what they need to do, when she has no idea of the horrendous situations that some of them may be facing with finances, in-laws, neighbors, or whatever.... Try to learn as much as you can about a child's family life...You can't help much, but at least you can be empathetic when communicating with the parents.

Offer evening conference times.

We had the building opened at certain times for evening conferences and it was wonderful. Fathers could come, and working mothers had time to go home first and feed the children.

Establish regular office or call-in hours.

You should let everyone know, school personnel as well as parents, that you have regular hours when parents can reach you. Don't schedule any other activity during those hours.

Know the child as a person.

Indicate to parents that you know—or are getting to know—their child as a person, not just as a student. Don't make the child's academic progress the sole focus of the conference. Parents always ask themselves, "Does this teacher really know my child?"

Meet parents early.

In the spring, we called the kindergarten parents in for an informal meeting. We prepared them for what they could expect in the first couple of weeks in first grade. It helped a lot because it built up trust.

We're usually in school the last week in August, getting our rooms ready, so we tell parents that if they want to bring their kids by, they can have a look at their classroom. I think that's been a big help.

Some parents are used to getting only negative feedback about their child. Teachers know who these kids are. But sometime in the first month of school, way before report card time, I make sure that I let parents of these kids know about something that their child did right.

Send home a classroom newsletter.

I've started to send home a Friday newsletter to tell parents what went on that week, what was going on next week, and whatever else I thought they needed to know. I've gotten very positive feedback, so I'll continue to do it. Parents are so thankful to get something from the teacher that tells them what their kid is doing in school.

Take advantage of Parents' Night.

I would tell teachers to give parents a much information as possible at the parents' night that schools schedule at the beginning of the year. Go through everything! I've found that having a well-organized and well-orchestrated parents' night can set the tone for the entire year with parents.

Send summertime notes.

It's important, especially if you're coming into a school as a new teacher, to send notes to parents over the summer to introduce yourself, mention your interests, and to say how much you're looking forward to seeing their children.

These are some of the many practical techniques that teachers are using to improve their communication with parents. In most cases, investing in proactive communication requires little or no extra time, and can often save time over the school year.

As teachers become more effective communicators, their morale rises, parents become more cooperative, and the principal needs to devote less time to mediating between parents and teachers. All of these outcomes contribute to an improved learning environment for children.

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Marilyn Nolt

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PARENT EDUCATION: Going from Defense to Offense

Tired of defending your innovative programs to concerned parents? Here's a different approach.

PAUL M. HEALEY

Too many times during the school year we find ourselves in the position of defending a particular program to parents who have sincere concerns about it. But many of these sometimes confrontational situations could be avoided if we would take the time to educate our parents. It is the lack of parent knowledge and communication that keeps the principal and teachers on the defensive. Let me cite a couple of examples.

During American Education Week in our school, parents can visit their child's classroom to observe the instruction. It was after one such visit that a second-grade teacher came to me, upset about a remark that a parent had made. The class had been involved in a cooperative group lesson, with the teacher moving from group to group to observe the children, who were using manipulatives to demonstrate a math concept. About 15 minutes into the lesson, the mother got up from her chair, approached the teacher and said, "I'll come back when you're teaching something."

Another time, I received a call from parents requesting a meeting to discuss their child's third-grade curriculum. After they talked with the teacher, I met with them to discuss their concerns, which centered around the fact that they were not seeing quantities of ditto worksheets coming home. They were concerned that their child might not be ready for the next grade. It seems the child's teacher was using a whole language approach, cooperative groupings, and authentic assessment practices in her classroom, but the parents were unfamiliar with these approaches and had difficulty relating to them.

These are only samples of many such situations that principals face on a daily basis. The usual defense is to listen to the concerns and then try to explain the practice or program. But wouldn't it be nice to eliminate these time-consuming distractions? We think that we have found a way to accomplish this at our school.

Over the past six years, Shepherdstown Elementary School (grades 1-3) has been undergoing a transformation as our teachers implement such practices as whole language, cooperative learning, process writing, authentic assessment, developmentally appropriate practices, manipulative math, and computer networking. While the teachers were given ample time and resources to experiment and become comfortable with these ideas, we found that parents questioned them because they were unfamiliar.

We realized that we hadn't done a good job of informing and educating the parents, so we devised a two-pronged plan to keep parents interested and up-to-date about our educational programs—to go from defense to offense. Our keys to success are communication and involvement.

Communication

We can't expect parents to support our endeavors if they don't know anything about them. But school-home communication is also a vital link in maintaining and enhancing the partnership that must exist between the school and the community. Epstein (1991) notes that while hundreds of schools and teachers have found ways to successfully involve families, their work is often unknown or unrecognized even in their districts because they have not taken significant steps toward building community partnerships.

To create such partnerships, schools can't depend on hit-or-miss communication. They must provide an ongoing information link to educational programs and practices. This can be accomplished through a monthly newsletter distributed to all families and businesses in the community. Classroom teachers can also be encouraged to contribute brief weekly or monthly overviews of relevant topics and happenings.

A friendly newsletter, focusing on people and with lots of short news items along with human interest stories, can develop good relations with parents and the

Paul M. Healey is principal of Shepherdstown Elementary School in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

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community. Such newsletters should be:

- Attractive
- Appropriate
- Brief
- Easy to read
- Published regularly and on schedule
- Timely
- Informative
- Entertaining
- Distributed to both parents and the general public. (PSBA 1989).

Involvement

It is not enough to involve parents in school activities; we must give them opportunities to experience the curriculum. We have found parent workshops on selected topics, such as whole language and the use of manipulatives in math instruction, to be an effective and rewarding way to accomplish this. Some of our guiding principles in organizing a parent workshop include:

Plenty of notice: A one-week notice is not sufficient. Parents need to be notified in writing about a workshop at least one month ahead. Additional written reminders two weeks and one week before the workshop are also helpful.

Time: Parents need to know the starting and ending times for the workshop, and every effort should be made to adhere to these times. We have found that we can conduct a workshop, allowing for audience participation, in two hours.

Babysitting: We need to recognize that many parents have difficulty finding and affording care for their children during the evening. Parents are much more willing to attend a workshop if the school can provide babysitting on the premises.

Presenters: While it is not difficult to bring in speakers to talk to parents, it is far more beneficial to use members of your staff. We have found that this practice lets staff members demonstrate their professionalism, and that the parents respect their efforts.

Format: For our math manipulatives workshop, we presented a brief rationale for the process, then immediately broke the parents into groups which rotated among various stations where teachers showed them how to use manipulatives to discover various math concepts. For our whole language workshop, we used demonstrations and audience participation to highlight such key areas as shared reading, guided reading, process writing, and invented spelling. In both workshops, the parents' participation gave them a rich understanding of their children's everyday classroom experiences, as well as strategies to assist their children at home.

Questions and Answers: It is a good practice to allow adequate time during a workshop session for participants to ask questions. Presenters should be honest and open, and should not attempt to respond when they are uncertain.

Videotaping: Because some parents, for a variety of reasons, are not able to attend a workshop, we videotape all our workshops and make them available in a library where parents can check out cassettes to view at home.

Evaluation: The workshop evaluation form provides parents with an opportunity to give us specific feedback, and encourages them to express their opinions about additional workshop topics.

Playing offense takes time, energy, and commitment, but it provides rich rewards for your staff, students, parents, and educational programs. And it sure beats playing defense. □

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National Statistics on Wealth and Poverty

- Between 1983 and 1989 the incomes of the richest one percent of Americans, some 800,000 households, grew more than 87 percent. With approximately 5.7 trillion in net worth, the top one percent was worth more than the bottom 90 percent (84 million households, with a combined net worth of about 4. 8 trillion) (Meisler, S. 1992).

- Each year since 1986 has broken a postwar record for the gap between rich and poor. The median income of young families (families with parents 30 years or younger) plunged by one third between 1973 and 1990, despite the fact that many families sent a second wage earner into the workforce (Children's Defense Fund, 1995).

- Between 1987 and 1992 the number of poor children under six grew from 5 to 6 million, and the poverty rate for children under six reached 26 percent. Forty percent of children in young families are poor (Children's Defense Fund, 1995). More than a third-2.8 million-of the nation's three and four-year-old children were from low-income families in 1990, a growth of 17 percent since 1980 (GAO, March 1995).

- A majority of poor children under six have parents who worked full-time or part time. A full time wage earner in a family of four making minimum wage would generate income worth 52 percent of the poverty line. With the Earned Income credit, the family's income would reach only 66 percent of the poverty line (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1995).

- Between 1969 and 1989 the number of young white men earning less than the poverty figure for a family of four rose from one in 10 to almost one in four. For African American men the comparable figure rose from 26 percent to 37 percent; for Hispanics, from 25 percent to 40 percent (Schneider & Houston,, 1993).

- Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) accounted for only one percent of all federal expenditures and has been declining in proportion to other spending. Between 1975 and 1990 welfare benefits declined 35 percent (Schram, 1991).

- There is an inverse relationship between welfare spending and "dependent" poverty. Dependent poverty, or the inability to get out of poverty without relying on government expenditures, *decreased* when expenditures grew (Schram, 1991). When families are helped with child care, health care, and work related expenses, they are far more likely to find and keep jobs.

- Affordable housing for low-income families is increasingly difficult to find. There are two applicants for each subsidized housing unit, with further cuts proposed by the legislature. Over half of poor families spent more than half their income on housing (Children's Defense Fund, 1995)

Collaborative Leadership for Parent Groups

by Christie Connard

When I began teaching parents I saw myself coming to their rescue on the white horse of my professional expertise with solutions for all their problems. This position as expert and authority soon became a hot seat. Parents asked questions I could not answer or reported back that my fix did not work. Eventually I got off the hot spot by giving up my role as "the parenting expert."

I now see myself not as the authority but as a person *with* authority in regard to the functioning of the group; not as a person responsible for the parent's learning but as a facilitator and supporter of learning; not as "the expert" but as one resource person with areas of expertise.

Effective parent educators perform two key functions in parenting groups. The first is to create the conditions that promote learning. Although parents, as adult learners, are largely self-motivated and self-directed, the environment is critical. This means providing

- a comfortable atmosphere and ground rules for safety and trust
- structured learning activities
- tools or procedures to identify goals and solve problems

The second function is leadership—leadership that is collaborative, sees the learning process as a joint venture, and gives parents an active, responsible role.

Elizabeth Jones's book, *Teaching Adults*, describes a model that is helpful to parent educators. In this model, power is exercised *on* the students when they are given no choice; the learning is teacher-controlled and directed. Power exercised *for* the student means the student's growth is facilitated and the learning experiences are designed to increase the student's self-esteem and confidence. When power is exercised *with* the student, the teacher and student learn together. The difference between power for or with is control. When power is used for the student, the teacher is intentionally controlling the learning—guiding, structuring, and supporting the student toward a goal. When power is used with the student, the student and teacher are both creating and learning together.

Using this model, a parent educator's leadership is expressed in working for the parents by creating an encouraging environment, and working with the parents by sharing ownership and responsibility for the learning situation to design the class—its curriculum and group dynamics.

The process begins with the first session when parents are asked, "What do you want to have happen here? This is your class." This is a way of saying parents' interests and concerns are important and parents are responsible for their own learning.

By incorporating parent agendas when structuring and focusing the class, the parent educator can create a flexible, responsive curriculum. Bragging or sharing times that encourage parents to tell about a success, a child's emerging skills, or problem resolution, are often a springboard for discussion and provide opportunities to give parents information at their most teachable moments. Other ways instructors can lead in a collaborative way are by

- making decisions through group consensus
- allowing parents to assume responsibility for the classroom, its set-up, and equipment
- encouraging parents to learn from each other
- providing information, resources, and choices rather than solutions
- letting parents make discoveries for themselves

Discovery methods of instruction give parents information and choices without telling them answers. Effective parent educators trust parents to make the right choices for themselves and their families and to learn what it is they need in order to grow as a parent. This kind of instruction respects individuality and diversity of lifestyles and values.

Instead of providing a solution when a parent concern is expressed, the leader may choose to pass the question back to the group with the comment, "Have any of you felt this way or had this happen to you?" The discussion that follows helps parents to recognize that they do know about parenting, that their experiences are shared by others, and that they can learn from one another. Simply providing a solution may miss the opportunity to empower parents and develop mutual support.

Group dynamics play an important role in parent learning. To be effective, the group must be a comfortable, safe place to accept new ideas and try new behaviors. A facilitator can encourage parents to know and support each other by

- helping them to learn each other's names
- connecting parents with common interests
- encouraging social activities such as potlucks or mom's night out
- giving parents time to talk with each other
- helping new or less popular parents be accepted by the group

Modeling respect and acceptance is another way parent educators create conditions of safety and trust. This happens when instructors

- take time to really listen
- let parents know their input is valued
- reinforce risk taking
- see failures as opportunities for learning
- emphasize the similarities within the group
- encourage group norms to be tolerant of diversity
- support and respect different lifestyles
- make a special commitment to draw out and support a timid or fearful parent

Understanding that how they teach is as important as what they teach, facilitators will lead in ways that promote a sense of sharing and community. By using a collaborative leadership style, effective parent educators help parents overcome isolation and gain competence and confidence in their ability to solve their own problems.

Christie Connard trains and supports parent educators in her position as the Educational Coordinator for Parent/Child Instructors in the Family Resource Department at Linn Benton Community College in Albany, Oregon. The department has provided community-based parent education and family support to 2,500 families annually since 1973. Based on fifteen years of experience working with families, Christie has written The Parent Education Instructor Handbook *(for teachers of cooperative parent/child classes),* Educating Parents: Instructor Handbook, *and co-authored* The Parent Educator Coordinator's Manual. *She is a member of the Family Resource Coalition.*

For more information about the handbooks and training programs, contact: Christie Connard, Department of Family Resources, Linn Benton Community College, 6500 Pacific Blvd., Albany, Oregon 97321, 503/928-2361, ext. 384.

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COMMENTARY

Parents Are 'Experts' on Their Children

By Judy McKnight

I read the headline of Gene I. Maeroff's Commentary (" 'School Smart' Parents Strengthen Education," *Oct. 25, 1989*) with enthusiasm. I share the outlook it seemed to suggest, and since I'm always eager to read the opinions of someone who agrees with me, I started right in. By the end of the essay, however, Mr. Maeroff and I had parted ways—he having estimated too conservatively the role of parents in their children's education.

Mr. Maeroff is correct to remind us of the great trust parents place in teachers and schools. His comparison of selecting a school with purchasing an automobile is apt: We "buy" our children's education, he suggests, by taking the first car we come to on the lot, without even looking under the hood.

And once we've purchased our children's educational vehicle, I might add, many of us fail to care for it properly. Plenty of parents drive into the self-service gas station as needed—in response to requests for conferences, signatures, and our presence at meetings—and we try to fix things when they're not working right. But how many have plans for routine maintenance and upkeep?

Before he begins delineating his advice for parents, Mr. Maeroff warns that they "can take for granted nothing about the future of their children—including the quality and outcome of their schooling." I agree wholeheartedly with his suggestion that they "observe classes and read themes, tests, and homework assignments"—and would further recommend that they do so throughout the school years, even though children will complain, scream, and accuse their parents of treating them like babies or not trusting them.

Mr. Maeroff is on the right course when he writes, "A wise parent gets to know a child's teacher and establishes a dialogue with the teacher that lasts the entire school year." But when he concludes that "[t]he teacher is the expert, and parents should be prepared to defer to him on many judgments," he and I part company.

Most teachers are dedicated professionals who draw on their expertise in content and instructional methods to make schooling work for children; they often are more knowledgeable than parents about their subject areas, teaching strategies, and the ways children learn. Parents should seek and strongly consider their views. But teachers are not the only "experts" among us.

Parents are the experts on their children. We have known them longer and we know them better than anyone else. We are their first and most important teachers. And when we are being totally honest with ourselves, there is hardly anything anyone can tell us about our children that we don't already know or couldn't have suspected.

Many of the problems education faces stem from the fact that parents, schools, and society will not acknowledge this simple reality. The kinds of advice parents and schools might follow if they accepted the notion that parents are the experts on their children may suggest just how revolutionary this idea is.

Parents might participate in their children's education in the following ways:

- Put themselves inside the child's formal educational process. They should review assignments regularly, even when work is being completed successfully and independently. Such involvement enables parents to see the kind of challenges the child is facing; to assess his ability to manage assigned tasks; to enrich or expand on the child's studies; and to judge how he is performing without having to wait for a report card every nine weeks.
- Catch their child doing well. When he comes home particularly excited, pleased, or motivated by something that has happened at school, parents might let the school know. A phone call or note will be appreciated and will alert a teacher to what works for a child.
- Talk to the child about school; even interrogate him if they must. Parents should not just accept "fine" and "O.K." One piece of information each evening adds up over time.
- Trust their instincts. Whenever they feel uncomfortable about something they see in school or hear from the child, parents should ask about it—not in an aggressive, accusatory way, but in a responsible, inquiring manner, much as they might consult a mechanic about a whirring sound in their car's engine.

They shouldn't worry that they will become a bother. Each time they inquire, they'll learn a little more about the school, the principal, the teacher. After a while, all that learning will lead to trust—a trust based on knowledge, not one that masks ignorance.

- Be advocates for their child. While backing the goals and expectations of the school, they should also support the child by helping him understand problems, find solutions, and avoid difficult or unacceptable situa-

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tions. In such circumstances, parents should let the school know what they are doing and might suggest ways in which teachers and staff members can help the child.

- Take their concern to the next level, if, after weighing the school's point of view and after seeking compromise or agreement, they still have a problem with a policy, practice, or decision.

Other parents may have the same concerns. An unsatisfactory situation can go unchecked for months—even years—if no one speaks up. And even if no one else complains, the parents' job is to ensure their child's success in school; they must not let embarrassment or intimidation prevent them from fulfilling this responsibility.

To promote the constructive involvement of parents, schools might consider the following steps:

- Acknowledge that parents are the experts on their children. Schools can learn something from all parents, even those who are neglectful, unresponsive, abusive, aggressive, or uninformed, and they should do whatever is necessary to incorporate parental expertise.
- Be "proactive." Parents who have been conditioned to think that their role in school is limited to joining parent-teacher associations, serving on advisory councils, or selling candy bars, magazines, and seasonal fruits will need to be encouraged to become partners in their children's education.
- Establish administrative procedures that ease access to staff members. Schools should ensure that phones are answered quickly by people who can direct calls and take messages accurately. Staff members should be urged to respond promptly, and parents should be invited to visit the school. Schools should provide for translators and guides as needed.
- Make it part of the school ethos that parents' concerns are considered legitimate and addressed. Staff members should be discouraged from categorizing, patronizing, or judging parents.
- Recognize that an important part of a teacher's job is to communicate with parents on a regular basis. Schools should require parent-teacher conferences at all levels.

This position will require rethinking teachers' schedules and accommodations.

- Be prepared to forge true partnerships with parents—collaborations based on mutual respect and compromise.

The fact that parents depend on schools has sometimes given schools the upper hand when disagreements arise and provided parents an excuse for not speaking up. But schools depend on involved parents, too, if they are to do their job well.

In suggesting approaches for parental intervention, Mr. Maeroff writes that a savvy parent "should have a sense of just how far to push without jeopardizing the teacher-student relationship" and that "a school-smart parent uses intervention gingerly, not unlike a member of the police bomb-squad assigned to disassemble a device of unknown explosive power." These views, with their misleading implications for teachers and parents, are unacceptable.

Rather, as professionals, teachers should be willing to gather and consider information from all relevant sources when making decisions regarding their students. One of their most important sources of information, solicited or unsolicited, is parents.

If parents are afraid that their children will suffer should parents make their wishes or concerns known, then something is wrong. Whether in a classroom, school, or district, such a situation is indefensible, and parents must complain—all the way to the top, if necessary. ■

Judy McKnight is a parent and educator in Falls Church, Va.

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THE ECOLOGY OF THE FAMILY: A Background Paper For A Family-Centered Approach To Education and Social Service Delivery

Prepared by
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February 1996

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THE ECOLOGY OF THE FAMILY: A Background Paper For A Family-Centered Approach To Education and Social Service Delivery

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INTRODUCTION

This training module, *Working Respectfully with Families: A Practical Guide for Educators and Human Service Workers* was developed for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Integration of Education and Human Services Project. The goal of this project is to increase the ability of education and human services providers to form effective and supportive partnerships with each other and with the families they serve.

The purpose of this background paper is to familiarize the trainers of these modules and participants in the workshops with the research, theories, and practice knowledge that are the foundation of the workshop. The specific strategies and applications of a Family-Centered Approach are covered in the workshop materials.

AN HISTORICAL FOOTNOTE

This paper is a synthesis of information from developmental psychology and sociology primarily. It draws from the literature of these fields at a time of change in both fields. In the last twenty years, child-oriented research in developmental psychology has evolved dramatically. It has moved from studies of the child in isolation to studies of one-way, caregiver to child developmental influences. Next, researchers began to consider reciprocal relationships, the way a child influences his or her caregiver and vice versa. Currently, developmental psychologists are studying how development is shaped by complex, reciprocal child-father-mother-sibling interactions.

While developmental psychology has focused on child-adult relationships, sociology has been concerned with marital relationships and the family as a whole in a social context. Recognizing the need to look at the family from both perspectives simultaneously, both fields are looking at child and family development in new ways. The coming together of these two areas of research has resulted in the adoption of an ecological framework.

The summary that follows is intended to familiarize practitioners working with families with some key concepts, rather than provide in-depth understanding. Much of the richness and detail of the research and theory has been left out. Those wishing to understand the evolution and complexities of the ecological model more fully will find this information in the sources listed in the bibliography.

A PROCESS, NOT A METHOD OR CONTENT

A Family-Centered Approach is a PROCESS for delivering services to families that will fit many different "content areas", be it support for teen parents, family literacy or education for low-income children. It is not a set of particular practices but rather a "philosophy" in which families are recognized as having unique concerns, strengths and values. A Family- Centered Approach represents a paradigm shift away from deficit- based, medical models that discover, diagnose and treat "problems" in families to an ecological model. The ecological model which is the theoretical foundation for a Family-Centered Approach, is described below. It views families from the perspective of "a half-full cup" rather than half empty. This approach builds and promotes the strengths that families already have. The key components of a Family-Centered Approach are:

- **Creating partnerships and helping relationships.** Families are supported and child development is enhanced through helping and partnership relationships.
- **Building the community environment.** Families gain information, resources and support through their connections to the community environment.
- **Linking families and community support**. Participation, two-way communication, and advocacy strengthen both the community support network and family functioning.

The ecological paradigm is still emerging. It represents a integration of research and theory from developmental psychology and sociology, with experiential knowledge from social work, family support, early intervention and early childhood education. It represents a coalescing of what researchers are learning about the way different social environments and relationships influence human development. Because it is a new model with many as yet unexplained elements, the ecological model is still in a state of flux. However, the basic tenets of the ecological model have been established for some time and can be stated as:

- Human development is viewed from a person-in-environment perspective.
- The different environments individuals and families experience shape the course of development.
- Every environment contains risk and protective factors that help and hinder development.
- Influence flows between individuals and their different environments in a two-way exchange. These interactions form complex circular feedback loops.
- Individuals and families are constantly changing and developing. Stress, coping and adaptation are normal developmental processes.

(adapted from Whittaker & Tracy, 1989, p. 49-51)

KEY CONCEPTS OF AN ECOLOGICAL MODEL

INTRODUCTION

A focus on the individual, isolated and independent, is deeply embedded in our culture and values. In contrast, an ecological model emphasizes the interconnections of events and the bi-directionality of effects between organism and environment. An ecological perspective views human development from a person-in-environment context, emphasizing the principle that all growth and development take place within the context of relationships. Thus, a child must be studied in the context of the family environment and the family must be understood within the context of its community and the larger society. The language of the ecological model provides a sharp contrast to the image of the lone frontiersman pulling himself up by his bootstraps, the "paddle my own canoe" mentality upon which our legal, educational, and social service delivery system are often based.

THE FAMILY AS A SYSTEM

From an ecological perspective, the most logical model of a family is a system. While there are critics of this conceptualization (Hinde, 1989), most researchers now approach the family from what could be loosely called a "systems perspective" (Kreppner & Lerner, 1989). A systems approach to human development considers the way relationships within the family and between the family and social environment influence individual development and family functioning.

Systems theory has guiding principles that apply to all kinds of systems including business and industry, community organizations schools and families. These principles are helpful in understanding how families function and how families and communities interact. Some principles of systems relevant to a Family-Centered Approach are:

- **Interdependence**. One part of the system cannot be understood in isolation from the other parts. Children cannot be understood outside the context of their families. Any description of a child has to consider the two-way patterns of interaction within that child's family and between the family and its social environment. Describing individual family members does not describe the family system. A family is more than the sum of its parts.
- **Subsystems**. All systems are made up of subsystems. Families subsystems include spousal subsystem, parent-child subsystems and sibling subsystems. A family's roles and functions are defined by its subsystems (Fine 1992; Stafford & Bayer, 1993, Walsh, 1982).
- **Circularity.** Every member of a system influences every other member in a circular chain reaction. A family system is constantly changing as children develop; thus it is almost impossible to know for certain the causes of behavior.
- **Equifinity.** The same event leads to different outcomes and a given outcome may result from different events. What this suggests is that there are many paths to healthy development and there is no one-best-way to raise children (Stafford & Bayer, 1993).

- **Communication.** All behavior is viewed as interpersonal messages that contain both factual and relationship information (Krauss and Jacobs, 1990).
- **Family Rules**. Rules operate as norms within a family and serve to organize family interactions (Krauss and Jacobs, 1990).
- **Homeostasis.** A steady, stable state is maintained in the ongoing interaction system through the use of family norms and a mutually reinforcing feedback loop (Krauss and Jacobs, 1990).
- **Morphogenesis.** Families also require flexibility to adapt to internal and external change. (Krauss and Jacobs, 1990).

Key Point:

A Family-Centered Approach borrows from family systems theory. Family systems theory gives us useful principles for studying children within the context of their family relationships. This framework requires us to stop operating as if children exist in isolation. Effective interventions understand and respect each family's system.

The Environments of a Family Ecology

A basic ecological premise stresses that development is affected by the setting or environment in which it occurs. The interactions within and between the different environments of a family make up the "ecology" of the family and are key elements of an ecological perspective. The environments of a family's ecology include:

- **Family**. The family performs many functions for its members essential to healthy development and mediates between the child and the other environments.
- **Informal Social Network**. A family's social network grows out of interactions with people in different settings; extended family, social groups, recreation, work. Ideally, this network of caring others shores up feelings of self-worth, mobilizes coping and adapting strategies and provides feedback and validation.
- **Community Professionals and Organizations**. A community's formal support organizations provide families with resources related to professional expertise and/or technology.
- **Society**. Social policy, culture, the economy define elements of the larger ecology that impact the way a family functions.

Environments Help or Hinder Development

A given environment may be bountiful and supportive of development or impoverished and threatening to development. Negative elements or the absence of opportunities in family, school or community environments may compromise the healthy development of children or inhibit effective family functioning. Here are examples of different environments in a child and family's ecology and their impact:

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- As children move out into the world, their growth is directly influenced by the expectations and challenges from peer groups, care-givers, schools, and all the other social settings they encounter.
- The depth and quality of a family's social network is a predictor of healthy family functioning. During normal family transitions all families experience stress. Just having someone to talk to about the kids over a cup of coffee, swap child care, or offer help with projects, buffers a family from the stresses of normal family life.
- Strong linkages between families and community organizations such as schools, open channels that allow vital information and resources to flow in both directions, support families, schools, and communities.
- The work environment, community attitudes and values, and large society shape child development indirectly, but powerfully, by affecting the way a family functions.

The Ecology of a Child

When considering the ecology of a particular child, one might assess the challenges and opportunities of different settings by asking:

- In settings where the child has face-to-face contact with significant others in the family, school, peer groups, or church:
  - Is the child regarded positively?
  - Is the child accepted?
  - Is the child reinforced for competent behavior?
  - Is the child exposed to enough diversity in roles and relationships?
  - Is the child given an active role in reciprocal relationships?
- When the different settings of a child's ecology such as home-school, home-church, school-neighborhood interact:
  - Do settings respect each other?
  - Do settings present basic consistency in values?
  - Are there avenues for communication?
  - Is there openness to collaboration and partnership?
- In the parent's place of work, school board, local government, settings in which the child does not directly participate, but which have powerful impact on family functioning:
  - Are decisions made with the impact on families and children in mind?
  - Do these settings contain supports to help families balance the stresses that are often created by these settings?
- In the larger social setting where ideology, social policy, and the "social contract" are defined:
  - Are some groups valued at the expense of others (Is there sexism or racism)?

- Is there an individual or a collectivist orientation?
- Is violence a norm?

(Adapted from Garbarino, 1982)

The Ecology of a Family

We are used to thinking about the environments children experience, but the environments families encounter also contribute to child development by their impact on family functioning. In a community there may, or may not, be the resources and relationships a family needs. Within its community setting, each family fabricates its own web of support from the formal and informal resources available. A family may forge many connections, a few strong connections, or no connections at all to the community resources. These connections link families to the tangible and intangible resources of the community.

Just as the child's environment offers challenges and opportunities, community settings offer challenges and opportunities for healthy family functioning. Generalizations about family-community interactions found in the literature include:

- Rural families have few employment opportunities, lower economic well being, fewer educational opportunities and less access to health care and social services. Urban families, on the other hand, have higher crime rates, more impersonal ties, higher density, and noisier living conditions (Unger & Sussman, 1990).
- Many parents must cope with the threat of violent crime in their neighborhood. A family's response to demands and challenges from a community environment may promote or hinder family functioning and child development. Withdrawing emotionally, keeping children inside, and restricting child activity are coping strategies parents use when faced with violence in their neighborhood, but they may also impede normal development. (Garbarino & Kostelney, 1993).
- Families are affected by how responsive community organizations are to family needs. Powell (1990) identifies five strategies that make early childhood programs more responsive to families. These include: increasing parent-program communication; giving parents choices between different programs; assessing family and child needs; redefining staff roles and using community residents; and involving parents in decision-making.
- The relationship between families and their community changes and evolves over time. The needs and interests of family members change over the life span. Issues of responsiveness also change with aging and stage of development.
- "Community" may refer to relationships and social networks as well as a physical location. (Unger & Sussman, 1990) A family's informal social support network often provides services that are more accessible, culturally appropriate and acceptable than the services offered by formal support systems (Gottlieb, 1988).

A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE: GOODNESS OF THE FIT MODEL

An ecological perspective focuses on dynamic developmental processes including the way stress, coping and adaptation contribute to development. A useful concept for understanding this view of development is the "goodness of the fit" model. This model suggests healthy development and effective functioning depend on the match between the needs and resources of a child or family and the demands, supports and resources offered by the surrounding environment. The developing individual responds to the "environmental fit" through developmental processes associated with stress management, coping and adaptation.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

In terms of child development, the "goodness of fit" refers to the match between the developmental needs of children and the demands, resources and capacities of their family, school and community environments. Children adapt to specific demands and expectations from home, school and community as part of the developmental process. The attitudes, values, expectations and stereotypes other people have about how a child should be, or act, mold the child. The skills and competencies required of a child by home, school and community, also shape development. A child's behavior in the face of these demands will depend on his or her skills, resources, support and experiences (Lerner, 1993).

The behaviors expected of a child at home may be different than those a child's needs at school. It has been proposed, for instance, that differences in goals, priorities and expectations between home and school may contribute to low academic achievement of minority children (Powell, 1989; Bowman & Stott, 1994). The match between a child and home, school and community environments determines whether or not a given child is able to meet basic needs, form nurturing and supportive relationships, and develop social competence, all of which greatly influence the child's life trajectory (Lerner, 1993).

FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

The "goodness of fit" model is useful for understanding how to support and strengthen families as well. Families develop too. They move through predictable developmental stages just as children do. Families must also respond to the demands and expectations from work, social groups, community institutions and the society as a whole. Stress builds when the resources and coping skills of a family are inadequate to meet the demands and expectations of the social environment. Family stress levels are a predictor of "rotten outcomes" for children. If stress increases beyond a certain point, for whatever reason, a family's ability to nurture its children decreases (Schorr, 1989).

Mismatches With The Environment

A lack of fit or a mismatch can happen between children and their family or school environments or between a family and community environment. Problem behaviors in school may often be attributed to a mismatch between a child and the expectations of the school

setting (Fine, 1992). Mismatches also happen when the home culture and values are at odds with the dominant values of the school environment. This poses a threat to the linkages between family and school. The threat is lessened when both sides are carefully respectful and recognize the importance and value of each to the child. When a mismatch occurs and a child is disruptive or a family needs outside help, it may not be due to a deficiency in the child or family. The mismatch may come from a lack of resources or support from the social environment.

Key Point:

A Family-Centered Approach incorporates the "goodness of the fit" model by seeking to understand and improve the match between the needs of children and their families with community resources and support.

BEHAVIOR AS A COMPLEX INTERACTION OF FACTORS

"When we examine the family from an ecological point of view, no one person or thing.. can be realistically identified as the 'cause' of a problem" (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfus & Bochner, 1990, p.63). Behavior from a ecological perspective, is more complex than stimulus A causes predictable response B. The environmental demands and the reciprocal relationships between people interact with individual characteristics in complex chains of influence that define behavior. Although parents have a profound influence on the ability of the child to develop in a healthy, competent manner, children also influence their parents' behavior. As Adolph Adler observed, "The child is the artist as well as the painting." Therefore, when dealing a child's acting out behavior, or addressing a family's financial need, professionals need to consider not only the individual but also contributing factors from the environment and interpersonal relationships.

Key Point:

A Family-Centered Approach seeks to strengthen family functioning. To do this, the factors contributing to the way a family functions need to be studied and understood.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY: RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Risk is a statistical concept used to predict the probability of negative outcomes. Resiliency and protective factors are the positive side of vulnerability and risk (Werner 1990). Risk and protective factors are found both within the child (temperament, physical constitution, intelligence, education) and/or within a child's environment (caring adults, high expectations, good schools, high crime levels).

A child or family's developmental trajectory results from the negotiation of risks on one hand, and the exploitation of opportunities on the other. A way to conceptualize these interactions is to think of an ever changing equation containing plus and minus numbers. At any given

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time two or more numbers may combine to bolster development in a positive direction or push development toward negative outcomes. If the "solution" of the equation were graphed repeatedly, over time, it would represent the life trajectory of an individual. For example, perhaps biology contributes to a child's high intellectual potential. This should set the course of the child's development in a positive direction. This potential could be unrealized or move the child in a negative direction if a school setting failed to provide an appropriate educational experience leading the child to drop out of school. We know the following about risk and protective factors:

- The presence of a single risk factor typically does not threaten positive development. In situations where a child is vulnerable, the interaction of risk and protective factors determines the course of development.
- If multiple risk factors accumulate and are not offset by compensating protective factors, healthy development is compromised (Schorr, 1989; Werner & Smith 1992).
- Poverty increases the likelihood that risk factors in the environment will not be offset by protective factors (Schorr, 1989).
- When a child faces negative factors at home, at school, and in the neighborhood the negative effect of these factors is multiplied rather than simply added together (Werner & Smith, 1992; Schorr, 1989).
- Resiliency studies explain why two children facing similar risks develop differently. A core of dispositions and sources of support, or protective factors, that can buttress development under adverse conditions have been identified (Benard, 1991; Bogenschneider, Small & Riley; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1990, 1992).
- Dispositions that act as protective factors include an active, problem-solving approach and a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Resilient children are characterized by a belief in their power to shape and have an impact on their experience.
- Caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for participation are protective factors for children found in families, schools and communities (Benard, 1991).

Protective Factors

Protective factors reduce the effects of risk and promote healthy development. Protective factors influence the way a person responds to a risk situation. The protective factor is not a characteristic of the person or the situation, but a result of the interaction between the two in the presence of risk. The presence of protective factors helps to change a developmental trajectory form a negative direction to one with a greater chance of positive outcome. Following are some examples of the ways protective processes redirect a developmental trajectory:

- If a child with a genetic disability has supportive nurturing caregivers, the developmental impact of the disability is reduced (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990).

- A teen mother's strong social support network reduces risks to the mother-child relationship (Schorr, 1989).
- If a child has one strong parent-child relationship, the risk associated with marital discord is reduced (Rutter, 1987).

Application To A Family-Centered Approach

Knowledge of risks and protective factors is used in a Family-Centered Approach to promote the enhancement of nurturing environments for children in families, schools and communities. Rutter (1987) identifies four mediating mechanisms. These mechanisms act in ways which:

- Reduce the impact of risks;
- Reduce negative chain reactions;
- Maintain self-esteem and self-efficacy through relationships and task achievement;
- Open opportunities for positive development.

A word needs to be said here about emphasizing "prevention" or "promotion" approaches. Much of our thinking about how to work with families has been dominated by a treatment, prevention and promotion continuum. The continuum ranges from:

- **Treatment**: eliminate or reduce existing dysfunction (a deficit-based approach) to
- **Prevention**: protect against or avoid possible dysfunction (a weakness-based approach) to
- **Promotion**: optimize mastery and efficacy (a strength-based approach) (Dunst, Trivette & Thompson 1990).

A Family-Centered Approach rejects the treatment model in favor of a blending of prevention and promotion models. It uses strength-based, non-deficit strategies to strengthen and support family functioning.

THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

As is often the case, while the research substantiating the ecological model was slowly gathering, practitioners began to build programs that operationalized the model. Head Start, early intervention and family support programs were the first generation of programs to translate the ecological perspective into practice.

The key components of a Family-Centered Approach; creating helping and partnership relationships, building the community environment, and linking community resources, grow out of the experiences of these early programs. The first applications of the ecological perspective in programs for families resulted in:

- Recognition of the strengths and capabilities of families;
- A redefinition of the parent-professional relationship toward greater collaboration and partnership with parents;

- Service delivery practices blurring the traditional boundaries between social welfare, physical and mental health, and education.

The following description of program contributions from Head Start, early intervention family support programs, and public schools gives a very brief overview of how the ecological paradigm translates into practices. The exercises and activities of the Working Respectfully with Families Workshops will explore these lessons and applications to enhance the collaboration of parents, schools, and social services.

HEAD START PROGRAMS

Based on evidence of the critical importance of early childhood, Head Start programs created a new model of support for the young child. During its 30 year history, Head Start programs have provided a model of ways to utilize protective processes to reduce the risks associated with poverty, prevent negative chain reactions that begin in early childhood and open new opportunities for children and their families. The key components of the Head Start model incorporated in a Family-Centered Approach include:

- A comprehensive approach to child development that combines health, education and social services;
- A strong emphasis on parent participation in the program services and program administration;
- A redefinition of professional roles toward greater collaboration and partnership with parents (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990).

EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Early intervention programs for children with special needs are prevention programs to: reduce the impact of risks associated with genetic and developmental handicaps; avoid negative developmental chain reactions resulting from this risk; and open opportunities for children with special needs. Responding to research (Bronfenbrenner, 1974) showing that interventions involving the family were more effective than those working with the child alone, early intervention programs redefined the relationship between families and professionals. Early intervention programs developed ways to create effective parent-professional partnerships that recognize a family's right to participate in decisions about their child as well as a family's need for information and support (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Rappaport, 1981, Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988).

Key lessons learned from early intervention programs are the important role family values and family strengths play in efforts to nurture children with special needs. Parents are no longer treated as children to be schooled by experts who know what is best for their child, but as partners with different kinds of expertise. Early intervention programs have distilled guidelines for how to build strong parent-professional partnerships. These guidelines include:

- Recognizing the knowledge and expertise parents have about their child and that child needs;

- Empowering parents, as a way to provide help and information and to increase a parent's ability to nurture children (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988).
- Negotiating a match between the family's values, needs and goals and the professional's approaches, priorities and services.

Key Point:
A Family-Centered Approach addresses strengthening families from a non-deficit orientation that builds on the strengths that all families have. The values and guidelines for a Family Centered Approach that flow from a non-deficit, strength-based orientation and are summarized in the family support section below.

FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMS

A set of assumptions and beliefs about families and service delivery principles has evolved from the application of ecological perspectives by family support programs. A Family Centered Approach incorporates these. The program design and services of family support programs are very diverse. These programs strengthen families by offering information, resources and emotional support. Farrow, Grant, & Meltzer (1990) outline beliefs and assumptions about families that are reflected family support programs and in a Family-Centered Approach as well.

- All families need help at some time in their lives, but not all families need the same kind or intensity of support.
- A child's development is dependent upon the strength of the parent/child relationship, as well as the stability of the relationship among the adults who care for and are responsible for the child.
- Most parents want to and are able to help their child grow into healthy, capable adults.
- Parents do not have fixed capacities and needs; like their children, they are developing and changing and need support through difficult, transitional phases of life.
- Parents are likely to become better parents if they feel competent in other important areas of their lives, such as jobs, in school, and in their other family and social relationships.
- Families are influenced by the cultural values, and societal pressures in their communities (Farrow, Grant, & Meltzer, 1990, p. 14).

These beliefs and assumptions about families guide the delivery of services by family support programs. The service delivery principles of family support programs are grounded in the practical experiences of serving families and are an important part of a Family-Centered Approach. Effective services for families should reflect these family support principles:

- Programs work with whole families rather than individual family members.
- Programs provide services, training and support that increase a family's capacity to manage family functions.

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- Programs provide services, training and support that increase the ability of families to nurture their children.
- The basic relationship between program and family is one of equality and respect; the program's first priority is to establish and maintain this relationship as the vehicle through which growth and change can occur.
- Parents are a vital resource; programs facilitate parents' ability to serve as resources to each other, to participants in program decisions and governance, and to advocate for themselves in the broader community.
- Programs are community-based, culturally and socially relevant to the families they serve; programs are often a bridge between families and other services outside the scope of the program.
- Parent education, information about human development, and skill building for parents are essential elements of every program.
- Programs are voluntary; seeking support and information is viewed as a sign of family strength rather than as an indication of difficulty (adapted from Carter, 1992).

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Traditionally, public schools have not had a strong emphasis on family involvement and support. Schools of education have typically offered little direct training in forming parent/teacher relationships. A 1987 University of Minnesota report on improving teacher education listed what researchers identified as the thirty-seven most important teaching skills; learning how to work with parents was not among them (Louv, 1992). However, a number of factors have contributed to the current focus on parental involvement as a way to improve educational outcomes for all children, particularly children from low-income families.

During the last 20 years, vast economic and demographic changes have resulted in increased economic hardship and stress for many families and an accompanying pressure on schools to increase our nation's competitiveness in a global economy. There is growing recognition that fostering "readiness" for kindergarten and for succeeding educational environments will require addressing the strengths and needs of the whole child. The National Education Goals Panel endorsed a complex, multifaceted definition of readiness, which includes physical well-being and motor development, social competence, approaches toward learning, language and literacy, cognitive development, and general knowledge (NEGP, 1994). This comprehensive definition requires a new approach to schooling, one which includes a shared responsibility for children's development and "will likely permanently alter the school's relationship with families and communities" (Kagan, 1992, p. 8).

Recognizing the vital role that parents play in their children's education, Title IV of the National Education Goals 2000: Education America Act encourages and promotes parents' involvement in their children's education, both at home and at school. Three decades of research have demonstrated strong linkages between parental involvement in education and school achievement (Riley, 1994). Family involvement is highest among middle-and upper-class families. However, regardless of parents' education, parental involvement with children's schooling is associated with better attendance, higher achievement test scores, and

stronger cognitive skills. In addition, when parents help elementary school children with their schoolwork, social class and education become far less important factors in predicting the children's academic success (Dauber & Epstein, 1993).

Low-income, minority, and limited-English proficient parents, however, may face numerous barriers when they attempt to collaborate with schools. These include: lack of time and energy; language barriers, feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem, lack of understanding about the structure of the school and accepted communication channels, cultural incongruity, race and class biases on the part of school personnel, and perceived lack of welcome by teachers and administrators (Fruchter, et al., 1992; SREB, 1994).

Given these potential barriers, it is not surprising that research has demonstrated that successful parent involvement programs must have a strong component of outreach to families. Studies show that school practices to encourage parents to participate in their children's education are more important than family characteristics, such as parent education, socioeconomic and marital status (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). A 1988 study of parental involvement in schools concluded that it wasn't parents who were hard for schools to reach, but schools that were hard for parents to reach (Davies, 1994). If schools are to become places where families feel welcome and recognized for their strengths and potential (Riley, 1994), school personnel must not only embrace the concepts of partnership and parent involvement, they must be given training and support to translate their beliefs into practice (Epstein, 1992).

While traditional forms of family involvement have focused on the supposed deficits of low-income and/or minority families, new models, congruent with the Family-Centered Approach advocated in this paper, emphasize building on family strengths and developing partnerships with families, based on mutual responsibility. In these approaches, parents are involved as peers and collaborators, rather than clients. Fruchter, et al. (1992), have identified four tenets of programs which have been shown to improve the educational outcomes for all children, particularly those of low-income and minority children: a) Parents are children's first teachers and have a life-long influence on children's values, attitudes, and aspirations; b) Children's educational success requires congruence between what is taught at school and the values expressed in the home; c) Most parents, regardless of economic status, educational level, or cultural background, care deeply about their children's education and can provide substantial support if given specific opportunities and knowledge; and d) Schools must take the lead in eliminating, or at least reducing, traditional barriers to parent involvement.

SUMMARY

This paper has presented the theoretical and experiential background of a Family-Centered Approach to delivering services to families. A Family-Centered approach is grounded in the research and theories of an ecological paradigm and shares many of the values and principles of Head Start, early intervention and family support programs. Specific implications and application of the key components of a family guided approach focusing on relationships, environments and linkages will be explored and discussed in depth during five workshop sessions.

The training sessions for a Family Centered Approach include the following two and a half hour sessions:

WORKSHOP I:	THE CHILD, THE FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY
WORKSHOP II:	DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES
WORKSHOP III:	CREATING FAMILY-FRIENDLY SCHOOLS
WORKSHOP IV:	HOME, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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Tips for Trainers

Generic Tips

- Arrive at least 20 minutes ahead of time to set up room and check equipment.
- Develop your agenda and provide a copy for all participants.
- Find out as much as possible about who your audience is and some background on their community—demographics, areas of strength and concern.
- Remind participants that it is their workshop and that their enthusiastic participation is essential. Sharing expertise and experience is critical to the success of the workshop.
- Listen carefully and respectfully. Acknowledge what people say even if you don't agree.
- Collect stories. Illustrate points with real-life examples, when appropriate.
- No one person has all the answers. Utilize the expertise of the group.
- If a group isn't working well together, it may help to recombine.
- When appropriate:

  Use humor

  Share personal experiences

Tips Specific to These Workshops

- Be very familiar with the concepts in the background paper, "The Ecology of the Family: A Background Paper for a Family-Centered Approach to Education and Social Service Delivery"
- Keep families at the center. Emphasize the role of the family.
- Be sure to give examples from both social services and education.
- Emphasize promotion, prevention approaches, building on strengths.
- Review family stories. Be familiar with all perspectives.
- You will receive materials for participant packets. Some time will be needed to place materials in the notebooks.

Resources for Trainers

The Change Process

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Ettington, E. (1989). *Winning Trainers.* Gulf Publishing.